LYRIC NARRATIVE IN LATE MODERNISM:
VIRGINIA WOOLF, H.D., GERMAINE DULAC, AND WALTER BENJAMIN

DISSERTATION
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Cheryl Lynn Hindrichs, M.A.

The Ohio State University
2006

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Sebastian Knowles, Adviser
Professor Brian McHale
Professor James Phelan

Approved by
Adviser
Graduate Program in English
This dissertation redefines lyric narrative—forms of narration that fuse the associative resonance of lyric with the linear progression of narrative—as both an aesthetic mode and a strategy for responding ethically to the political challenges of the period of late modernism. Underscoring the vital role of lyric narrative as a late-modernist technique, I focus on its use during the period 1925-1945 by British writer Virginia Woolf, American expatriate poet H.D., French filmmaker Germaine Dulac, and German critic Walter Benjamin. Locating themselves as outsiders free to move across generic and national boundaries, each insisted on the importance of a dialectical vision: that is, holding in a productive tension the timeless vision of the lyric mode and the dynamic energy of narrative progression. Further, I argue that a transdisciplinary, feminist impulse informed this experimentation, leading these authors to incorporate innovations in fiction, music, cinema, and psychoanalysis. Consequently, I combine a narratological and historicist approach to reveal parallel evolutions of lyric narrative across disciplines—fiction, criticism, and film.

Through an interpretive lens that uses rhetorical theory to attend to the ethical dimensions of their aesthetics, I show how Woolf’s, H.D.’s, Dulac’s, and Benjamin’s lyric narratives create unique relationships with their audiences. Unlike previous lyric narratives, these works invite audiences to inhabit multiple standpoints, critically
examine their world, and collaborate in producing the work of art. Hence, contrary to readings of high modernist experimentation as disengaged *l’art pour l’art*, I show that avant-garde lyric narrative in the late 1920s—particularly the technique of fugue writing—served these authors as a means of disrupting conventional, heterosexual, patriarchal, and militarist social and political narratives. During the crises of the 1930s and the Second World War, Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin turn to the lyric narrative technique of montage to advance a vision of the collaborative work of art as a means to critically engage with history, illuminate the stakes of the present moment, and inspire creative work for a different future.
Dedicated to my parents,

Janice and Walter Hindrichs,
whose boundless love and life-giving laughter
baffles and sustains me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members James Phelan, Brian McHale, and my
adviser Sebastian D.G. Knowles. At a key moment, Professor Phelan introduced me to a
methodological approach that would enable me to pursue the granite and the rainbow;
Jim’s encouragement, wisdom, and thoughtful guidance proved vital to this journey and
my growth as a scholar. I am grateful to Professor McHale for the elegant skepticism of
his scholarship and for the grace and wit of his support throughout this project. As a
teacher, Professor Knowles has taught me the value of performing passion in the
classroom, and, as a scholar, he dazzles in his passion for his performance whether on the
page or conference stage. Throughout my time at Ohio State, Seb’s mentorship,
idiosyncratic mind, and joy in the arts has been a steady beam and gem-like flame,
kindling my own passion to connect.

Morris Beja first introduced me to Woolf and Joyce and, with characteristic
greatheartedness, humor, and enthusiasm, set me off on this lark and plunge into
modernism and film. I am indebted to Murray for introducing me to such a jovial and
varied community of scholars and for the amazing opportunities the International James
Joyce Foundation afforded. I also wish to thank David Herman for helping me to see my
work from a fresh vantage, inspiring me in the final lap, and for his astute career advice
and guidance. Philip Armstrong, Kristin Bluemel, Jennifer Camden, Teresa Kulbaga,
Dana Oswald, James Weaver, and Susan Williams all read earlier drafts of this project and offered incisive and generous feedback.

I wish to thank the Department of English and Graduate School at the Ohio State University for the quarter-long summer fellowship and year-long Presidential fellowship that made all the difference in my ability to research and write this dissertation.

Finally, I am grateful for the inspiring conversations, insights, and companionship of Scott Banville, David Earle, Louis Goldstein, Brian Hauser, Chene Heady, Michael Meagher, Matthew Williams, and Molly Youngkin. I am humbled by the belief, love, and joy in life that my parents, Janice and Walter Hindrichs, and my brothers, Mike and Bryan Hindrichs, have shown me. I am most grateful that you listened, and agreed, when in a sudden intensity, I would say of some ordinary experience, “It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy.”
VITA


1998............................................ B.A., English, Truman State University

2001............................................ M.A., English, The Ohio State University

2001............................................ M.A., Women’s Studies, The Ohio State University

1999 - present.............................. Graduate Teaching and Research Associate
                                          The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapters:

### Part I. Lyric Narrative in the Late Twenties

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

   1.1 Lyric Narrative in Late Modernism .......................................................... 1
   1.2 Lyric Narrative ......................................................................................... 3
   1.3 Late Modernism .......................................................................................... 9
   1.4 An Outsiders’ Society ................................................................................ 11
   1.5 “The Narrow Bridge of Art” ....................................................................... 22

2. Fugues in Words: Virginia Woolf and H.D. ...................................................... 45

   2.1 Lyric Narrative in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” .................... 45
   2.2 Cultivating a Lyric Vision: Woolf’s Readers and the Work of Art in *The Waves* .......................................................... 51
   2.3 The Art of Fugue ...................................................................................... 57
   2.4 Axifugal: Attending to the Dimensions of the Text .................................. 66
   2.5 Sappho’s Lyrics: “having come from heaven wrapped in a purple cloak” .. 75
   2.6 Fugues in Words: Space, Time, Sexuality and Textuality in the Late Twenties . 88
   2.7 “Stars Wheel in Purple”: H.D.’s *HERmione* .......................................... 98
   2.8 Meta-fictional Metaphors and Woolf’s Narrative Turn ............................. 114
   2.9 Catching Light and Heat ........................................................................... 126
3. The Palimpsestuous Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 H.D.’s Lyric Narrative in <em>Palimpsest</em></td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Psycho-analytic Progression and the Pleasure-Principle: Woolf, Proust, H.D.</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Composing the Unconscious: “On the Mimetic Faculty”</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 The Work of Art in <em>Palimpsest</em></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 To Write or Not to Write: The Art of Work</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Was James Joyce Right?</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part II. Lyric Narrative in Film

4. Currents of Lyric Narrative Cinema: Germaine Dulac

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Seeing Music: Germaine Dulac’s <em>The Smiling Madame Beudet</em></td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 The Cinematic Eye: “Mollusk of Reference”</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The Eye in the Street: Woolf “Street Haunting”</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Germaine Dulac: Feminism in the First Avant-Garde</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Framing the Object of Lyric: <em>The Smiling Madame Beudet</em></td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Twin Mirrors: Dulac’s Self-Reflexive Lyric Narrative</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Innervating the Eye and Brain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Benjamin’s “Surrealism,” Woolf’s “The Cinema,” Dulac’s Avant-Garde</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 <em>The Seashell and the Clergyman</em>: “the ineluctable theme of the spiral”</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 <em>The Seashell</em> and <em>The Waves</em>: “unconscious optics”</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Benjamin’s “Surrealism”: Dulac’s “poetic politics”</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part III. Lyric Narrative in the Thirties and the Second World War

6. The Interval of Montage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Crossroads: Aesthetics and Politics in the 1930s</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Generations of Late Modernism</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Woolf’s “A Letter to a Young Poet” from Anon</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 The Revolutionary Work of “The Leaning Tower”</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 The Cinema and the Classes</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 H.D. Between Generations</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Three Levels of Montage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1 H.D.’s <em>The Gift</em> and Virginia Woolf’s <em>Between the Acts</em></td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 <em>The Gift</em>: The Optics of Memory</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 <em>The Gift</em> and <em>Between the Acts</em>: Walter Benjamin’s Literary Montage</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 <em>Between the Acts</em>: The Epic in the Intervals</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Conclusion .............................................................................................................536

8.1 “We have an interval” ......................................................................................536
8.2 Here and Now .................................................................................................557

Bibliography ...............................................................................................................580
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 <em>The Smiling Madame Beudet</em></td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AF: Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle
AP: Aesthetics and Politics
BTA: Between the Acts
CE: Collected Essays: Virginia Woolf
CU: Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism
D: The Diary of Virginia Woolf
E: The Essays of Virginia Woolf
GR: Granite and Rainbow
L: The Letters of Virginia Woolf
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Lyric Narrative in Late Modernism

On November 10, 1938, Theodor Adorno admonished Walter Benjamin on the methodology of his *Arcades Project*: “If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell” (*AP* 129). In pursuit of the bewitching qualities of lyric narrative, I have located my study at the crossroads of historicism and narratology. These theoretical approaches are particularly apt for an examination of how lyric narrative is deployed as an ethical and political response to the crises of late modernism. Adorno laments the “asceticism” of Benjamin’s refusal to provide a “speculative theory” that would provide didactic explanations to connect the juxtapositions of his literary montage: “What it must have cost you not to close the gap completely!” (130).

My interest lies precisely in the cost and the value of this gap, a space disclosed by the productive tensions produced by lyric narrative. This dissertation maps the development of lyric narrative as central to high modernism and focuses on a group of
high modernists who continue to develop the technique in response to the crises of the period of late modernism: the British writer Virginia Woolf, the American expatriate poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), the French filmmaker Germaine Dulac, and the German critic Walter Benjamin. Mirroring the back-and-forth track of lyric narrative, this study moves from formalist close readings of lyric narrative texts to historical context, from the authors’ biographical and critical writings on the possibilities of these new forms to the realities of the market and a deferred readership, from the heady experimentation of the late 1920s to the stark revaluations of the 1930s and early 1940s.¹ My theoretical approach, like Benjamin’s, steers a course between Brecht’s revolutionary aesthetics and Adorno’s steadying arm (AP 126). Heeding Woolf’s prescription in A Room of One’s Own, my analysis attempts to keep in touch with the poetic possibilities of lyric narrative and the prosaic limitations of writers’ and readers’ contingent realities (43). This introduction will map the two key terms of this study—lyric narrative and late modernism. An overview of this aesthetic technique and a reassessment of late modernism provide the groundwork for the chapters that follow.

¹ In “Ghosts and Monsters: On the (Im)Possibility of Narrating the History of Narrative Theory,” Brian McHale emphasizes the “tension” between history and structuralism in narrative theory (63): “under the big tent of narrative theory, structuralism and history jockey for position, each seeking to outflank or overcome the other, to contain the other” (64). As McHale goes on to show, each nonetheless depends upon its (repressed) other. Despite our desire to reconcile “these two orientations,” McHale writes, “their relationship has always been, and is likely to remain, a conflicted one” (67). This study does not seek to reconcile the two orientations but to play off their differences; indeed, I would even identify the primary tension of lyric narrative—the tension of a timeless mode with a time-bound mode—as aligned with the productive tensions of structuralism and historicism in narrative theory.
1.2 Lyric Narrative

As its attachment to “narrative” suggests, lyric here does not refer to the generic
definition of lyric as a short, non-narrative poem. Rather, I use lyric to refer to a poetic
mode as opposed to a narrative mode—our expectations of the linearly unfolding plot
found in conventional narrative. Spatially, we tend to chart narrative as a horizontal: it
is concerned with telling a story, one that moves from exposition, complication, to
resolution. In contrast, lyric has been mapped as vertical (Friedman, “Spatialization”
114-15). In the lyric or poetic mode, progressing time is subordinate to expression
(time’s progression seems to be transcended, frozen, or destabilized), and the reader
suspends judgment in the immediacy of lyric. In lyric narrative, then, the narrative
progression is driven less by plot, the linear unfolding of a story over time, than by our
interest in contemplating and taking part in the vertical departures of lyric, as in the
“Overture” of Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*.

---

2 M.H. Abrams’s definition reflects the “common use of the term”: any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought and feeling. Many lyric speakers are represented as musing in solitude. In *dramatic lyrics*, however, the lyric speaker is represented as addressing another person in a specific situation. (146)

3 See Susan Stanford Friedman’s chapter “Craving Stories: Narrative and Lyric in Feminist Theory and Poetic Practice” for the “inexact slippage between modes (lyric, narrative) and genres (lyric poem, novel), or between broad discourses (poetry, prose) and specific forms (poem, fiction),” as well as a discussion of how poststructuralists have tended to ahistorically reproduce “an oppositional binary in which the lyric/poetic/nonmimetic continuously disrupts the narrative/novelistic/mimetic” (*Mappings* 231). Friedman’s aim is to show the revolutionary potential of narrative in particular contexts; my aim is to relate the turn to a tension of lyric and narrative modes in the context of late modernism. See Paul Alpers’s “Lyrical modes” for a discussion of how “the term ‘mode’ is used in literary criticism,” and how that use might inform “music criticism and genre theories in literature and music” (59).
Although the term “lyric narrative” was coined relatively recently by narrative theorists, the technique spans genres, mediums, periods, and political orientations. Whereas the terms “poetic prose” and “lyrical fiction” tended to diagnose stylistic tics rather than to account for a fundamental departure from narrative conventions, the term “lyric narrative” marks a more nuanced study of texts that, being neither poetry nor conventional prose, had tended to fall between two stools. Indeed, as I will show, Woolf’s “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” describes the difference between fitful lyrical departures in prose and the lyric narrative texts emerging in modernism. Ralph Freedman’s *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (1963) stands as the first significant study to set out to define the form in a genre. For Freedman, “lyrical fiction” is defined “as the paradoxical submersion of narrative in imagery and portraiture,” in which writers “recreate the novel’s world as a metaphoric vision, a picture, or a musical evocation of feeling” (vii). In our twenty-first century context of “postclassical narratology,” new methodological examinations of lyric and narrative modes have provided new tools for a study of lyric narrative (Herman 2).

In *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*, James Phelan modifies Susan Stanford Friedman’s definition of lyric as “a mode that foregrounds a *simultaneity*, a cluster of feelings or ideas that projects a gestalt in stasis,” by adding the clarification that lyric suspends “internal judgments of characters (and narrators)” (31, 33). Phelan and Friedman take up Ralph Freedman’s analysis of how a lyric mode in prose can “exploit the expectation of narrative by turning it into its opposite: a lyrical progression”; how the effects of “lyrical immediacy” reduce the fictional world to “a lyrical point of view, the equivalent of the poet’s ‘I’: the lyrical self” (7-9); and how the
use of the lyric mode in narrative corresponds to different “literary milieu[x], which may define not only the nature of the form but the impulse behind it” (Freedman 17). The relationship of the literary mode to its milieu is a particular concern for this study. While Freedman begins with the provocative statement, “The assault of the twentieth century on inner experience has brought with it a profound reappraisal of the novel” (18), rather than pursuing this relationship of form to historical context, Freedman instead focuses on mapping the move from traditional to novel techniques. Phelan (with the approach of rhetorical ethics) and Friedman (with the approach of feminist theory) provide models for an analysis that would combine structuralist and historicist analysis. Taking up the narrative and rhetorical tools developed by theorists such as Phelan, Friedman, Peter Hühn, and David Herman, I return to Freedman’s groundwork to offer a more expansive definition of lyric narrative and to propose a study of the technique in a particular historical context.4

4 Phelan’s 'Narrative as Rhetoric' reopened the study of the “lyrical novel” by focusing on how the lyric and narrative modes position readers; his chapter on Woolf’s The Waves examines “the interaction between character and judgment in the two modes” (31-2). Friedman uses narrative theory for a feminist analysis of the subversive functions of lyric narrative in her essays “Lyric Subversions of Narrative in Women’s Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot” and “Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative.” Peter Hühn’s application of fundamental categories of narrative theory (“sequentiality, mediacy, and articulation”) to lyric poetry in “Transgeneric Narratology: Application to Lyric Poetry” offers suggestive models for studying lyric narrative in prose (140). It should be noted that the phrase “lyric narrative” is used regularly in analyses of poetry; it is rarely defined, however, and often assumed to mean poetry with elements of story-telling, as in the case of Paul Friedrich’s “Dialogue in Lyric Narrative.” David Herman’s introduction to Narratologies usefully describes the “postclassical” topography of narratology; the most significant, and exciting, “reconfiguration of the narratological landscape” has been the move to “models that are jointly formal and functional—models attentive both to the text and to the context of stories,” a move influenced by “rhetorical and feminist approaches to narrative analysis” (8-9) and marked by an emphasis on the “process and not merely the product of narratological inquiry” (16).
I argue that lyric narrative, through its tensions of the lyric and narrative modes, is foremost a technique that attempts to create for the reader a sense of “timeless time” (Benjamin, “Theses” 257). Such an effect is not necessarily or even best created by a “poet’s ‘I,’” “his soliloquy in solitude” (Freedman 189). In addition to lyric portraiture and the poet-protagonist’s stream of consciousness, modernists created a wide range of lyric narrative strategies (different kinds of lyric modes in different alternations with narrative modes) by drawing upon innovations in cinema and psychoanalysis and in looking to a history of lyric effects in other arts. Moreover, these techniques seek to create new relationships with audiences. Whereas Freedman (not unlike Adorno) writes that André Gide’s lyrical style “led to an overdependence on the reader’s imagination” (181), I will argue that this dependence is precisely the goal of these modernists’ lyric narrative experimentation, a claim that implicitly refutes the wholesale charge of high modernists’ solipsism.

In Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, Gérard Genette writes, “There are, in the history of texts, moments that one might call going over to prose” (219). As we learn from Giambattista Vico,

all literatures begin with poetry […] because oral (or even sung) transmittal, which precedes written transmittal, requires for (mnemo)technical reasons a form of expression that is formulaic and versified. […] But after those ‘archaic’ periods of versified recitation come the more silent times in which a different public prefers to read for itself. (219-20)

---

5 See Brian Richardson’s “Beyond the Poetics of Plot: Alternative Forms of Narrative Progression and the Multiple Trajectories of Ulysses” for a study of the “many different nonplot-based methods for producing events,” that is, narrative sequencing, in twentieth-century texts (168). His analyses of rhetorical and aesthetic sequencing, the “trajectory provided by the fugue” in Mann’s “Death in Venice” and in Joyce’s “Sirens,” and the use of a picture within a text to generate narrative are particularly relevant to this study.
Lyric narrative texts are those that insist on inhabiting a region between poetry and prose—on going over and going back—on cultivating an audience that “prefers to read for itself.” One of my primary questions, then, is what is gained in that back and forth? Genette’s troping of Vico is also useful in breaking the concept of “lyric” from its univocal connotation (the solitary “I”) which is particularly important in studying modernist lyric narrative strategies. What is particularly “new” about lyric narrative as a technique in modernism is the proliferation of lyric effects beyond the song of the solitary subject. These chapters will map the expansion of lyric effects used alongside narrative beginning with the experimentation of the late 1920s (when lyric is deployed to plumb the depths of the unconscious, and to approximate the immediacy of music and the moving image) to the reevaluations of lyric narrative and the move to the revolutionary work of art in the late 1930s (when the romantic lyric “I” is displaced by the lyric “we” and the voice of “anon”). Genette’s trope can also be mapped onto the other genres of my study—film and criticism. Cinema, which grew up alongside modernist literature and criticism, offers a striking twentieth-century instance of a new art form that we witness in its first “going over to prose” when, ironically, narrative “talkies” displace silent films, films that had tended to include many more lyric effects. Drawing upon impressionist precursors and modernist experimentation in the various arts, criticism in late modernism took on provocative hybrid forms, such as Woolf’s “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” Benjamin’s “One-Way Street,” and of course his monumental Arcades Project.

In his introduction to New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture, Mark Jeffreys poses a series of questions applicable to my study of the transformation of
lyric narrative during this period: “Does lyric poetry inevitably attempt to transcend history? Does it ever succeed? Can lyricism be reinvented as a historically engaged mode of writing, or could a lyric poem’s resistance to engaging its historical moment be figured as a genuinely subversive act within an oppressive culture?” (ix). The works I examine here do not attempt to transcend history, but they do ask us to examine the desire to do so and to inhabit a standpoint characteristic of lyric narrative: standing, sometimes precariously and sometimes sublimely, with one foot in the flow of history and with one foot in a realm outside of history. The turn to a tension of lyric and narrative modes enables this dialectical vision, the standpoint of timeless time. The pure lyric, a mode that would transcend history, is under critique in these texts. Likewise, pure narrative is rejected for its soporific effects, the satiety of naturalism or mere novelty. It is in holding in tension the “apartness of lyric as an oppositional stance planted firmly in a marginal position” (Jeffreys xiii) with the historical contingency and familiarity of narrative that these texts attempt a historically engaged aesthetic. In taking up the feminist and rhetorical approaches advanced in narrative theory, my aim is not to taxonomize lyric narrative per se (although I hope to contribute to that project begun in the work of Phelan and Friedman); rather, my goal is to show the centrality of lyric narrative to high and late modernism in prose, film, and criticism, to show how interdisciplinarity enabled its development, and to look at why four authors turned to a seeming esoteric form out of a desire to critique nationalism, imperialism, patriarchy, and class oppression in a period of crisis.
1.3 Late Modernism

In contrast to early modernism (modernism before the First World War), late modernism has only recently begun to receive its critical due. Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Wars* focuses on modernism during the late 1920s and 1930s, specifically the works of Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, and Mina Loy. Against the grain of the “grand narrative[s]” of modernism, particularly those that mark the end of modernism in 1930 or 1939, Miller defines late modernism according to the characteristics of the works of a younger generation of modernists not included in the “Auden generation” paradigm (5). Miller constructs a taxonomy of “key theoretical concepts” for tracking the emergence of late modernism; its basic features include “generalized mimetism” of a “deauthenticated world,” “self-reflexive laughter” that functions “to preserve and shore-up—to ‘stiffen’—a subjectivity at risk,” the “weakening of symbolic form,” and “a predominance of grotesque bodies” and “depiction of pure corporeal automatism” (62-4). Miller’s study is a valuable beginning to a reassessment of late modernism since it requires us to reconsider our narratives of modernism by focusing on its end; nonetheless, the necessary

---

6 There is, of course, a large body of critical writing on the literature of the 1930s and 1940s. However, this period has only recently begun to be assessed as “late modernism” in ways similar to assessments of early and high modernism. Such reassessments that are of particular interest to this study include Maroula Joannou’s collection *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* and Bonnie Kime Scott’s two volume *Refiguring Modernism*. In volume one, sub-titled *The Women of 1928*, Scott shows how 1928 marks a key year for modernist women writers, tracking their successes in this year in opposition to the “Men of 1914” (Wyndham Lewis’s phrase). In *Refiguring Modernism* Vol. 2, Scott writes that by 1928, “Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Djuna Barnes achieved the conditions necessary to launch out into work that made modernism, with a difference,” these writers “tackled substantive feminist issues, including lesbian identification” and found audiences and wages from sources “beyond the avant-garde”; however, the next decade marked a decline and reversal in the marketplace (the literary included) as well as for leftist and feminist politics, culminating in the year of disaster, 1939 (164).
next step is to recognize that late modernism must be defined both historically as a period (the late 1920s through the Second World War) and stylistically as plural. Just as Miller identifies “a number of divergent tendencies” among modernists, we should likewise acknowledge a plurality of late modernisms (22).

Miller acknowledges that his body of “late modernist literature” emerges alongside “a still developing corpus of high modernism” (10); unfortunately, that corpus too often appears as a corpse in studies of late modernism. A welcome exception to this tendency is Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* which focuses on high modernists (T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and E.M. Forster) writing during late modernism. Esty’s study offers a trenchant look at “the end-stage of a London-based modernism” in its relationship to the end-stage of British imperialism (3). In contrast to prevailing studies of English modernism at mid-century which center on “‘next generation’ novelists or on the Auden circle of young poets,” Esty focuses on “a residual or late modernism,” a generation for whom “the end of British hegemony” was not “a fait accompli” and thus an “occasion for searching attempts to manage the transition between imperial universalism and national particularism” (8). Although my focus on high modernists’ work in late modernism is international in focus and seeks to map the shift from high modernist experimentation to this moment of “end-stage” transition, many of Esty’s literary-historical claims are relevant to my study. For example, my claim that the romantic lyric “I” and attendant epistemological explorations of the subject in the 1920s is increasingly displaced by a lyric “we” and the author

---

7 Sebastian Knowles’s *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* centers “on the war work of seven British modernists: Woolf, MacNeice, Eliot, Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Waugh” and is an early reassessment of modernism during the late period (xiv).
effaced by “anon” in the 1930s is echoed by Esty’s contention that Eliot, Woolf, and Forster “presided over a self-obsolescing aesthetic” in the crises of “art’s autonomization and the lost organic community into the reactivated notion of cultural totality”: “their work in the late thirties defines the dialectical switchpoint where English modernism, projecting the reintegration of art and culture, becomes something else altogether” (12). The end of British hegemony was one of many transitions in a period of crisis that the authors of my study faced; lyric narrative, a dialectical switchpoint between the poetic and prosodic modes, proved an adept form for managing the transitions and challenges of late modernism.

1.4 An Outsiders’ Society

On or about October 1929, the character of modernism changed. Or rather, the contexts of modernism changed and thus its character was called into question. For high modernists, the 1920s had been a heady time of experimentation in a kind of transnational, transdisciplinary liberal arts laboratory; artists, authors, and critics turned to innovations in sister arts, sciences, and new technologies in an effort to push their art to its limits, to explore new dimensions of perception and knowledge, and to challenge audiences’ expectations of conventional narratives—both on the page or screen and in life. In an internationalist atmosphere of relative economic prosperity, artists in the 1920s could plumb the depths of the question of the work of art, testing its limits, and tutoring audiences in new ways of seeing. After 1930, world-wide depression, the General Strike in Britain, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise of fascism and the failure of communism meant that the valence of the question of the work of art—that is, what is the
work that art does, or should do, in a society—changed.\textsuperscript{8} The late 1920s had already meant a reassessment for both the younger generation of modernists who admired yet challenged their elders as well as those high modernists who had begun writing before the Great War. The 1930s crises, as well as the increasing popularity of radio and journalism, influenced many readers to prefer more conventional literature, a shift that, combined with the arrival of the sound film, has been described as the devaluation of autonomous art—that is, the avant-garde or high modernist literary text and the non-commercial film. For high modernists, the 1930s meant confronting how their art could or should respond to these crises, and it meant the increasing loss of a support network and audience for the experimentation that had burgeoned during the 1920s.

In the renewed debate about the social function of art in the 1930s, particularly literature and film, some writers, following Georg Lukács, argued that literature should return to a nineteenth-century realism or a didactic, propagandistic literature that would give a clear moral direction. This line can be seen as a reaction against some high modernists who entrenched themselves in the “totality” of the modernist artwork, the creation of a work (and world) that would transcend the crises, such as James Joyce’s \textit{Finnegans Wake}. The high modernists that I am interested in—Virginia Woolf, H.D., Germaine Dulac, and Walter Benjamin—chose neither path in late modernism. What unites their work is a shared belief in the complex, symbiotic relationship of aesthetics and politics. Revolutionizing their art—breaking from conventional narratives and transgressing traditional boundaries—meant the possibility of transforming the status

\textsuperscript{8} In \textit{A Theory of Art}, Karol Berger expands the question of “What is art?” into the more valuable question, “What should the function of art be, if art is to have a value for us?” (8-9).
quo, as audiences imagined and inhabited alternative standpoints via these revolutionary works. Lyric narrative provided a technique that could achieve the dialectical vision necessary to resist, on the one hand, the satiety of realism and, on the other, the shock for shock’s sake of modernist novelty.

One of my claims, and a basis for choosing these four figures, is that the relationship of aesthetics and politics theorized and enacted in these works can be described as feminist. Woolf has long been recognized as a feminist writer and theorist, particularly for her work in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*; having begun her career as a journalist for a feminist newspaper, Germaine Dulac has been hailed for her feminist filmwork, particularly *The Smiling Madame Beudet*; and H.D.’s prose and turn to psychoanalytic methods evidences a sustained feminist commitment. Not coincidentally, feminist scholars during and since feminism’s second wave have been central in bringing Woolf’s, Dulac’s, and H.D.’s works to the attention of a wider audience. But, Benjamin? If you can imagine the faces of Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin arranged in a four-square box under the rubric of feminism, it would seem that he’s the odd man out.9 Just as modernism has been recognized as plural, feminism, as feminist scholars have long recognized, is hardly a monologic discourse in theory or practice and does not preclude practitioners on the basis of sex. I believe the shared project of feminism is to understand and critique structures of oppression and to work toward a social equality that supports differences. What Benjamin’s work shares with

---

9 Leslie Hankins, nonetheless, has outlined the similar feminist underpinnings of Woolf’s and Benjamin’s works in “Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin: Selling Out(Siders).” In a footnote, Hankins asks, “Wouldn’t it be intriguing to have an exchange program between Woolf and Benjamin scholars for a few years so we might have even more rigorous materialist critiques of Woolf and more lyrical and feminist readings of Benjamin?” (31).
that of Woolf, H.D., and Dulac is an implicit feminism, one that seeks to expose
structures of oppression and networks of power and to invite and facilitate the creation of
alternatives. My claim is that the feminism evidenced in this group of late modernist
works consists of a double move of deconstruction and collaborative creation.

Joan W. Scott describes this double move in her essay on the uses of
poststructuralism for feminism; she argues that feminist theory can “enable us to
articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting on) gender” (and I would
extend her argument to categories such as race, class, sexuality, and ability) “without
either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them” (358). Scott’s two moves
in theory are those I identify in the works studied here: first, the exposure and critique of
exclusionary hierarchies and, second, the refusal of an ultimate truth, a refusal “in the
name of an equality that rests on differences—differences that confound, disrupt, and
render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition” (369). Nonetheless, I also
believe, as Donna Haraway has theorized, that feminism should not throw out the baby
with the bathwater in its rejection of Western objectivity. That is to say, while
recognizing the falseness of achieving any objective Truth, the process of working
toward a provisional (since impossible) objective truth through collective debate can be
valuable, and this focus on process can turn us back from the other extreme of a nihilistic
relativism that is a favorite charge of critics of poststructuralism. So, for example, in my
discussion of H.D.’s and Woolf’s use of montage in chapter five, I argue that these works
attempt a feminist optics: a feminist “objectivity” that counters a rationalist, scientific,
and historicist objectivity through “the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives”
(Haraway 194). The lyric departures of these texts enable a proliferation of such partial
perspectives, a de-centering of the “I,” and a reassessment of the “we” that becomes an invitation to creative engagement.

I also believe that the lyric narrative formal strategies of these texts, specifically the refusal to “close the gap completely,” evince a feminist ethic. Moreover, this feminist ethic is implicated in the paradox of lyric narrative as a political aesthetic: the modernist lyric mode enables an open-ended aesthetic that ethically attends to the audience’s creativity and differences, yet in doing so it necessarily risks political impotence. While the grounding of narrative allows for mediation, it is in this refusal of suture, in inviting the audience’s collaboration through the lyric narrative dialectic, yet in refusing to relinquish the valuable critical “running room” between the work and the Real, the author and the audience, as either didactic or postmodern works would, that these works continue to provoke audiences (Foster xiv). The feminist ethic of these works is similar to the collective subject of Rosemary Hennesy’s materialist feminism. Hennesy posits a combination of postmodern knowledges of discourse, a socialist feminist self-critique, and the modernist stance of resisting agon in order to achieve a collective subject that looks backward to history, as well as inward, and toward a horizon of social transformation. The latter direction is particularly relevant in examining how these works position readers. In contrast to the hopelessness of the works of the younger generation of late modernists, these works look to audiences beyond their here and now and sustain an idealism (even if weary and self-obsolescing) improbable for the younger generation of artists working in the wake of the Second World War.

One factor in choosing to focus on Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin is this kernel of hope, the marks of a humanist belief in a future that might redeem the
catastrophes of the present in their works. Moreover, the evolution of their modernist projects track along incredibly parallel lines. Each developed lyric narrative form in the period of high modernism out of a desire to create new modes of seeing through their works and thus new possibilities for social and political narratives in the world. In the period of late modernism, despite critiques from multiple fronts, lyric narrative became a key ethical strategy for responding to the crises of the 1930s and 1940s. In reading Woolf’s, H.D.’s, Dulac’s, and Benjamin’s works side by side, I show how these texts have three formal qualities that transgress the boundaries of the work of art by calling upon readers in new and compelling ways. First, they retain a narrative frame but queer or break that frame by emphasizing a tension with a lyric mode. Second, they are self-reflexive about the work of art (emphasizing the sense of “work” as verb, work as a process in a culture rather than a product). Third, in late modernism, these authors’ works move increasingly toward innovations that compel audience collaboration.

These works also move the audience into a new orientation toward history. One of my primary arguments is that Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin rely on the technique of lyric narrative in late modernism as a means to examine how we order or stage the past in order to make sense of the now. Breaking from a historicist and deterministic view of history, these works invite audiences to see history and the historical figure from a different angle of vision and to see themselves as agents of history. Holding a vision of time and timelessness in a productive tension, these texts’ lyric narrative forms posit a dialectical vision of history; they look to the past as coexistent with the passing present and ask us to connect our views of history, progress, and social organization with our vision of the present. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin offers three “Definitions of basic
historical concepts,” which are indeed redefinitions that reflect this reorientation to history: “Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken” (N10,2: 474).

Catastrophe, in Benjamin’s rubric, is not the incendiary or the burning building, but its relationship to the moment that surfaces long before the moment of destruction when the opportunity for a different future was open but not acted upon. The critical moment is not the pamphlet issued at zero hour, but the intervals between wars when the status quo is unquestioned. Progress is not the natural course of humanity, but contingent on engaged consideration and action. Lyric narrative, then, enables their works to achieve three things: one, to bring the audience into the intense immediacy of that moment of catastrophe; two, to provide a platform for the audience to critically examine the critical moment missed in the past and its consequences; and, three, to reveal the revolutionary measures necessary in the present.

The authors’ identities as exiles and outsiders, moreover, facilitated the creation of such alternative standpoints to hegemonic narratives of history, nation, sex, and class. In Three Guineas, Woolf’s narrator posits the creation of an “Outsiders’ Society” in which its members (the daughters of educated men) would work “by their own methods for liberty, equality and peace” (106). As members of this society, they would refuse oaths and bureaucracy and maintain an attitude of indifference toward war. They would engage in a comparative study of French, German, and English history and art, of “the testimony of the ruled—the Indians or the Irish, say—with the claims made by their rulers,” and a study of what nationhood means to a female citizen (i.e. it has no meaning) (108). This examination would lead the “outsider” to conclude, “in fact, as a woman, I
have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world”” (109).

Although an inheritor of privilege (the daughter of an educated man), Woolf’s standpoint as a British subject is slanted by her continual assumption of the role of outsider—either by the fact of her speaking as a woman, and thus a subject with no country, or by her attempts to see from other, marginalized, points of view. As a Frenchwoman, Germaine Dulac similarly lacked a country (women were non-citizens until 1944 in France) and was a pioneer in cinema not only in terms of aesthetic innovation but also as a woman in a position that soon became dominated by men. Dulac was attracted to silent films’ inherent internationalism (the arrival of sound being the foremost crisis for lyric narrative experimentation and international exchange in cinema in the 1930s), and lyric films’ ability to transcend boundaries of race, nation, class, and gender. Lyric narrative film could project the possibilities of life and imagination when such boundaries were transcended, while contrapuntally focusing in on the gritty realities of living with those boundaries and their consequences. Although working as insiders from the cultural centers of London and Paris, the works of these two feminist “outsiders” evoke more similarities than differences along this London-Paris axis. As chapter three and four will show, Woolf and Dulac share important precursors in developing their lyric narrative aesthetics—Montaigne, Baudelaire, and Proust. Woolf’s works were translated and published promptly in France and Dulac’s films were hailed by film groups in London.

That Dulac’s films received screenings in London was largely due to efforts by film societies supported by such entities as the POOL film group. The POOL group,
founded by H.D., Bryher, and Kenneth Macpherson, was an international effort that produced avant-garde films and published an international journal on cinema, *Close Up*. H.D.’s identity as an outsider, an American expatriate in London, is more readily apparent than Woolf’s and Dulac’s. Moreover, in focusing on her prose, this study reveals an H.D. who worked to distance herself from the “imagiste” identity that tied her to Ezra Pound and to the limits of a crystalline poetry. The unconventional life H.D. lived with her partner Bryher, primarily in London but also in Switzerland, and the “outsider” vantages her life afforded informs the portrayal of the artist-figures of her lyric narratives. Whereas the connections between the work of Dulac, Woolf, and Benjamin are largely implicit, more tangible lines of connection are seen in H.D.’s interest in avant-garde cinema, her sustained interest and admiration for Woolf’s writing, and her association with Bryher’s efforts on behalf of refugees and intellectual exiles during the Second World War. Inhabiting the vantage of exile, these outsiders tended to hail one another.

In her memoir of the Second World War, *The Days of Mars*, Bryher describes her triangulated identity: “I have three countries, England, Switzerland and America and I am proud of them all” (10). Commenting on Osbert Sitwell’s observation that Hilda “is always trying to balance her two nationalities,” Bryher writes, “it is foolish to belong to two countries because that always means a tug of war. Three are ideal, then one can stand aloof in what I maintain to be calmness of judgment” (79). In the same work, Bryher tells of an afternoon in 1940 when she “walked across the edge of a forlorn Hyde Park full of guns and searchlights, to seek consolation in a bookshop. There, turning over the pages of a just-published volume, Koestler’s *Scum of the Earth*, I saw the name...
Walter Benjamin and read of his death on the Spanish frontier” (22). Bryher had met Benjamin at a café near the rue de l’Odeon the previous April with Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier. Benjamin asked them whether they thought “he could live in New York” (23). Bryher writes, “What could we say? Other than Paris, there were few places where he would have felt at home” (23). Monnier consulted Bryher on whether he should leave at once when (and if) he received his American visa; Bryher explains that while she always urged “my own refugees” to go at once, she this time “trusted to emotion rather than reason,” agreeing with Monnier that it would be wise to wait before urging him to leave, to see how things turned out. What would he do, we wondered, in a small bedroom in windswept New York where there were no cafes at that time and few friends? I had heard while still in Switzerland that he had got away from Paris in time, we had tried to send him funds for the further journey to Lisbon but it is possible they never reached him; we supposed that he had landed safely in America. (23)

Bryher’s impression of the exiled Benjamin at home in the Paris café, as she observes him “on a chase [with Monnier] of some philosophical comet where neither Sylvia nor I could follow them,” is resonant of her observations of, and care for, H.D. during the 1920s and during the Blitz in London: “An artist thinks in a different way, linking present impression to past experience” (23). Benjamin and H.D. form another London-Paris axis in this study. Both were exiles thinking “in a different way,” dependent upon others for undisturbed “contemplation,” and dependent on readers to take up the comet’s chase, the work of realizing the constellation of fragments and nodal points they arranged for our activation.

The sense of unfinished business these works inspire—the desire for a safe landing in America and the need for intervention—is yet another motivation in my choice
of these four figures. This “unfinished business” is not merely biography (although their self-identification as outsiders and exiles certainly is relevant, as is the fact of the wartime suicides of Woolf and Benjamin, Dulac’s decline after a stress-related stroke in the late 1930s, and H.D.’s postwar breakdown), nor is it merely canonical (although the project of revaluing undervalued texts is also an important factor since each questioned and upset our understanding of tradition). Rather, this “unfinished business” is a formal strategy of the texts themselves. Lyric narrative enabled these authors to avoid, on the one hand, the solipsism of the total work of art, an art for art’s sake sealed off from contingent reality, and, on the other hand, to avoid the closed circuit of didactic or propagandistic literature: the kind of book that has “unfinished business,” as Woolf wrote of her materialist contemporaries, in that they leave “a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never by read again” (“Bennett” 326-7). In contrast, many of their late modernist works—particularly Woolf’s, H.D.’s, and Benjamin’s—have proven hard to shelve to readers and scholars in the last two decades. It is my claim that their narrative choices—particularly the techniques of fugue writing and montage, the connections the texts invite between the reader’s “now” and that of the work, and the texts’ call for audiences to reflect ethically on their moment in history—that create this complex sense of “unfinished business.” In other words, I argue that readers and scholars have increasingly taken up these texts and continue to write back and with them because of, one, the openings inherent in their lyric narrative form and, two, the alternative vision, or philosophy, of history that these texts create.
1.5 “The Narrow Bridge of Art”

In “The Future of All Narrative Futures,” H. Porter Abbott examines “what people are currently predicting for the future of narrative” (530). Writing during a period of technological innovations that enable “striking transformations of the feel and texture of narrative” (530), Abbott’s study parallels the reevaluations regarding narrative (or, more prominently, “the novel”) in the late 1920s, when innovations in technologies (radio, film) and other disciplines (psychoanalysis, physics) had enabled or inspired striking transformations in the arts. Whereas Genette posits a history of cultural moments of “going over to prose” (219), Abbott looks at a subsequent transition; he would have us ask, “when does something stop being narrative and start being something else?” (534). While seeming to move in opposite directions, these two transitions are meant to provoke questions about how and why formal shifts occur in a culture at particular historical moments. For Abbott, one answer for when narrative “start[s] being something else” is “when the linear gives way to the lyrical, that is, when attractions of the discourse—aesthetic and emotional—absorb more attention at the expense of the story” (534). In the late twenties, critics such as Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster likewise reflected on this going over from narrative to “something else,” the attractions (and distractions) of the lyric mode. It is useful to look at Woolf’s and Forster’s own analyses of their cultural moment in relation to formal innovation and their predictions for the future alongside late modernist lyric narrative texts, and from the retrospective vantage of the “future” that they wrote to—which includes narrative theorists such as Abbott and Genette. In mapping the shifts between narrative and lyric during late modernism, however, the following chapters do not posit a linear movement. Likewise, the comparative analysis I
engage in tracks a back-and-forth course across these chapters, preferring to read these works together rather than in isolation. Before introducing a comparison of how Woolf’s and H.D.’s formal innovation is related to larger political and ethical motives in late modernism (as articulated by Woolf’s “A Narrow Bridge of Art” and Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*), I provide a brief overview of how this argument develops across the following chapters.

In chapter two, I read Woolf’s short story “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points” (1928) in the context of Woolf’s evolving narrative theories, her analyses of precursors Walter Pater and Henry James and contemporaries Marcel Proust and E.M. Forster, and her reflections on the evolving form of her novels *The Waves* (1931) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The story, I argue, represents a move toward the possibilities of the lyric moment in narrative for changing the direction and shape of fiction. It is a move in which Woolf shows how thematic content (love between women) and form (lyrical expansion characteristic of a fugue rather than linear narrative progression) are in a dialectical tension. I show how the double-movement of the lyric narrative—the relationship its characters model and the similar relationship it invites between author and reader—is a double movement in modernist aesthetics and feminist ethics. I locate the intertwined aesthetic and political developments exemplified by Woolf’s story as part of two contemporary turns in form and content that modernism and feminism enabled in fiction: first, a spate of “fugue writing” that took place in the twenties, and second, a surge in the depiction of lesbian characters and Sapphic contexts that culminated in 1928 in the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. Comparing H.D.’s novel *HERmione* (1927) to Woolf’s story, I relate these simultaneous booms to the
modernist turn toward self-reflexive writing and a strategic feminist turn toward lyric narrative.

In chapter three, I focus on the central story of H.D.’s triptych novel *Palimpsest* (1926). This work utilizes fugue writing to establish a critical standpoint for questioning the role of the artist in history. In contrast to her early imagist lyrics, H.D.’s lyric narrative prose enabled her to explore the psychoanalytic and poetic apparatuses, the artist working at art in and of modernity, and the role of art in reflecting history and formulating an ethical standpoint. Although H.D.’s prose has been critiqued as a turn away from contingent history toward the timeless aesthetics of lyric, much of H.D.’s prose takes as its subject the limits of aesthetic solipsism, questioning the cultural role of the avant-garde in the wake of the shock waves of World War.

In chapters four and five, I turn to films emblematic of the evolution of a lyric narrative aesthetic within cinema which preceded the crises of the 1930s—Germaine Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) and *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927). Whereas Dulac’s early 1920s films tend to include lyrical departures in a narrative progression, her late 1920s films push the limits of lyric narrative film by incorporating techniques of surrealism and by aspiring to a visual music. Benjamin’s theorization of the dialectical image and the cinematic work of art’s revelation of “unconscious optics” provide a frame for analyzing Dulac’s films. Virginia Woolf’s cinematic essay-fiction “Street Haunting” and “The Cinema” also provide a comparative frame for Dulac’s lectures on the role of the avant-garde. In chapter four, I trace cinema’s lyric narrative roots to Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, a model for both Dulac in *Madame Beudet* and Woolf in
“Street Haunting” in their departures from narrative progression in favor of tunneling into characters’ psychology.

In chapter five, I show how the lyricism of Dulac’s late 1930s films, which seek to both depict and recreate the flow of the unconscious, was advanced by the lyricism of the surrealist movement. These films take up the modernist project of circumventing literary representation in order to immerse audiences in the processes of the construction of desire and meaning. By the end of the decade, writers and filmmakers increasingly related the avant-garde film’s potential for reproducing the workings of the psychoanalytic apparatus to the medium’s power to effect social and political change. In their essays on cinema, Benjamin, Woolf, and Dulac each use surrealism as a point of reference for their own lyric narrative experimentation. Benjamin’s “Surrealism” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Woolf’s “The Cinema,” and Dulac’s “The Avant-Garde Cinema” place surrealism in counterpoint with their own lyric narrative experimentation in order to consider how best to position audiences as active participants rather than passive receivers.

Chapter six challenges dominant narratives of the late modernist period by surveying these four authors’ 1930s works. I compare the intergenerational positioning of H.D.’s involvement in psychoanalysis (her relationship with Freud) and cinema (her work with the POOL group) and of Woolf’s interest in younger poets and her push for the collapse of the tower of privilege in “The Leaning Tower” and “A Letter to a Young Poet.” Benjamin’s and Dulac’s 1930s works, meanwhile, reveal a shared interest in techniques of documentary, a reliance on the principle of interruption, and an ambivalence regarding the decline of the social position of the intellectual in the face of
the rise of fascism. All four authors’ late works continued to develop lyric narrative by
turning to the technique of montage, using it to highlight the audience’s role as co-
producers of the work. In contrast to the younger generation, these high modernists in
late modernism retain a passionate hope for the possible fulfillment of the Marxist ideal
of an intellectual common ground for subsequent generations.

In chapter seven and eight, I turn to the use of montage in three World War II
texts—H.D.’s *The Gift* (1940-44), Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1938-41), and
Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* (1927-40). I examine two levels of montage in
Woolf’s and H.D.’s novels: the first level is the portrayal of the technique as undertaken
by an artist-character within the story-world, and the second level is the author’s own use
of the technique as a structuring device. Using Benjamin’s theorization of “the
revolutionary work of art” in “The Artist as Producer” (1934) and “What is Epic
Theatre?” (1939), I argue that by framing the montage within a text that itself utilizes the
technique, these authors invite audiences into the collaborative work of preserving and
creating in the face of the return of World War. In chapter eight, I conclude by turning to
a third level of montage: how these texts have been assembled for our present vision.
These three works each carry with them the good fortune and burden of intervening
hands that reassembled the texts. I argue that the montage structures of these texts are
designed to hail future readers who, as editors and scholars, act as caretakers of the texts’
vision. Moreover, the authors’ biographies of suicide, breakdown, and survival have
influenced these critical interventions and, despite the great difficulty of these texts,
increased their likelihood of reaching a wide audience. Hence the texts usher us into
what Benjamin calls a “now of recognizability,” in which the potential of a past moment
is “actualized” in the present, a “now” equipped to recognize and make use of it (N10,2: 474).

As this chapter overview suggests, if there is a singular move being mapped in this narrative of late modernism, it is a move toward balance and productive tension—between aesthetics and politics, author and audience, the work and the real. In the late 1920s, when these four figures were each engaged in theorizing, questioning, and creating works that attempted such a balance, Woolf and H.D. crafted narratives and essays that invite readers to enter into the question of the work of art and its future. While each shared a similar desire to achieve an ideal balance, the move was, and is, inevitably a fraught one—H.D.’s metaphor for the artist’s attempt at a balance between the lyric and narrative modes is the tightrope (*Palimpsest* 176), for Woolf, a narrow bridge. Nonetheless, extending a hand to their audiences, through criticism and the self-reflexive scene of the artist at work, proved one means of navigating the narrow strait.

In a 1927 article published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf notes the tendency of critics to fix their gaze upon the past and suggests, despite the impossibility of speculating on the future, that the critic has a duty to “to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going” since “we” are indeed in an “age” of flux: “things are moving round us; we are moving ourselves” (*CE* 2: 218). Turning a diagnostic eye on “modern literature,” Woolf speculates on the reasons for a general turn to prose and the attempt of writers to force “the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it” (*CE* 2: 218). One likely reason is that “for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so intense, so personal, and so limited, is not enough” (*CE* 2: 219). Whereas there “was a form once”
that could express the “contrast and collision” of modernity—“the poetic drama of the Elizabethan age”—the “poetic play” fails to express present generations’ “attitude toward life” (*CE* 2: 219-20). Woolf looks to the conditions of the present, what contradictions the work of art must be malleable enough to express, and how traditional forms fail:

> The mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one’s fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist. (*CE* 2: 219)

Lyric poetry is of too fine a fabric to contain it; the modern poetic play, like modern poetry, fails because the writer “is not at his ease. He is afraid, he is forced, he is self-conscious,” and, thus, in turning to poetry and the past, wants “not a veil that heightens but a curtain that conceals” (*CE* 2: 221).

Characteristic of Woolf’s critical method (which both enacts and describes the new form that is her subject), Woolf proposes that we can understand this change by taking “a walk through the streets of any large town” (*CE* 2: 222). This trope signals lyric narrative’s roots in Baudelaire’s figure of the *flâneur*—a central figure for the four authors of this study. As Woolf’s use of the trope suggests, modernist lyric narrative departs from its precursors in shifting the emphasis from the lyric “I” of the *flâneur* to the polyvocality of the street, and moreover, to the *flâneur*’s companion—the reader. Woolf asks that “we” take “a walk with our friend”; in looking together, a dual vision, the complexity of modernity becomes legible: we see, once again, “Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain” (*CE* 2: 222). Thus, the subject of modernity is not served by literature’s traditional division of labor. If “poetry has always been
overwhelmingly on the side of beauty” and “insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction,” then “[p]rose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants” (CE 2: 223). If the future form of the novel would produce the texture of modern life, then it would need to transgress these allotments. For Woolf, certainly not a disinterested observer, the genre of poetry seems unlikely to be up to the task of containing such contradictions, and “the modern mind” is indeed more suited to prose: “It may be possible that prose is going to take over—has indeed, already taken over—some of the duties which were once discharged by poetry” (CE 2: 224).

Woolf’s prognostication that prose will be the preferred method for a multiplicity of purposes in the next decade echoes Bakhtin: “That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading” (CE 2: 224). Woolf goes on to speculate on a particular kind of these “so-called novels” of the future: “It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much

---

10 Responding to David Herman’s and Monika Fludernik’s histories of narrative theory, Brian McHale writes, “A specter is haunting narrative theory […] That specter is none other than Mikhail Bakhtin” (61). Bakhtin’s theories both inform my narratological definition of lyric narrative and his theories frequently parallel (temporally and in terms of content) the aesthetic theories voiced by Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin. “Institutionally, Bakhtin is a nomad, a sort of wandering Jew or hungry ghost, doomed restlessly to crisscross the intellectual world without ever settling in any particular niche,” and thus liable to such uncanny “splitting and multiplying until now we have a whole host of spectral Bakhtins” (McHale 62). Since my study includes Benjamin (another sort of wandering Jew or hungry ghost among the disciplines—although, I hardly think this is an unhappy fate) as well as H.D. and Woolf (whose identities have similarly multiplied, been appropriated, and inspired a sometimes cult-like possession by readers and critics), Bakhtin will have to remain a ghostly figure in this text as well.
of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted” (CE 2: 224). Woolf doesn’t dally to name this new form of the book, since the important task is to understand “its scope and nature” (CE 2: 224). The name I use to describe this so-called novel is lyric narrative, and I find in Woolf the writer who is the most concerned with understanding, via criticism, its scope and nature and whose career, begun in more conventional narrative, reflects a sustained concern in the cultivation and evolution of this “something else” in order to get at the “something else” of modern life that escapes both poet and traditional novelist. It is tempting to define lyric narrative simply in terms of Woolf’s dialectic of the “poetic” and the “prosaic”; in A Room of One’s Own she proposes that the writer must “think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment” (AROO 43). However, in its different connotations in Woolf’s work, “prosaic” proves as variable a word as “lyric.” Woolf uses “prosaic” to refer to the prosodic narrative mode (realist, materialist, or factual story-telling in prose) as well as to the marginal matter of everyday life; moreover, she further destabilizes the term by elevating the prosaic to the poetic, or rather, discovering the poetic in the prosaic.\footnote{Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson use the term “prosaics” for two concepts reflective of Bakhtin’s thought: “First, as opposed to ‘poetics,’ prosaics designates a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular over the poetic genres. Prosaics in the second sense is far broader than theory of literature: it is a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the ‘prosaic’” (15). Although Morson and Emerson claim “prosaics” as their “own neologism,” Woolf’s frequent use of the term in precisely these two senses suggests another precursor, and one whose thought interestingly parallels Bakhtin’s.}

The complex tensions of the poetic and prosaic, in the multiple senses of these terms, which the evolving lyric narrative form would make possible are articulated in Woolf’s “The Narrow Bridge of Art.” It is interesting that Woolf uses a speculative tense for this new kind of “book on the horizon,” since she has already published the kind of
work she predicts—one that combines attributes of both prose and poetry—and is
imagine her most experimental fiction yet, *The Waves*. According to Woolf, this new
form will, like poetry, “stand further back from life” than has the novel; it will make use
of fiction’s power to record fact and detail, but will avoid the materialist pitfalls of the
“sociological novel or the novel of environment” (*CE* 2: 224-25). Woolf likewise faults
“[t]he psychological novelist” for limiting “psychology to the psychology of personal
intercourse,” of the “remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of
what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether for Tom” (*CE* 2: 225).
Poetry will enable the new form to “give not only or mainly people’s relations to each
other and their activities together” but also “the relation of the mind to general ideas and
its soliloquy in solitude,” that “large and important part of life [that] consists in our
emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death,
and fate” (*CE* 2: 225). The lyric mode reintroduces the “impersonal relationship[s]” that
the narrative mode slights (*CE* 2: 225). As I will show, what is particularly innovative in
Woolf’s lyric narratives is her crafting of lyric moments when the reader him or herself is
called into such an impersonal relationship, such as in the “Time Passes” section of *To
the Lighthouse*. The merit of introducing this distance into narrative is that it enables the
text to “take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern
mind” (*CE* 2: 26). That is, it “will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his
imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the
closeness and complexity of life” (*CE* 2: 226). Indeed, lyric narrative doesn’t merely
describe these incongruous things, but creates that queer conglomeration in the reader’s
relation to the text—we alternate between immersion, “closeness,” and a critical distance, “stand[ing] further back from life.”

The difficulty, in Woolf’s view, is to create a work in which the poetic and prosaic sustain their tensions throughout. Questioning whether daring, supple, fearless prose can nonetheless “say the simple things which are so tremendous,” Woolf reminds us of our “feeling of discomfort in the presence of a purple patch or the prose poem. The objection to the purple patch, however, is not that it is purple but that it is a patch” (CE 2: 226). When the reader is set up to “expect the rhythm, the observation, and the perspective of prose,” in works like Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* or George Meredith’s *Richard Feverel*, the “lyrical, splendid” passages nonetheless jar (CE 2: 226-27). However, *Tristram Shandy* stands out as “a book full of poetry, but we never notice it; it is a book stained deep purple, which is yet never patchy” (CE 2: 227). Sterne, then, is Woolf’s precursor in finding this balance, which is, rather, a constant flux between the lyric and narrative modes: “There, one sees, is poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry” (CE 2: 227). The trick, it would seem, is to know when to renounce one for the other: “You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands. Some you must leave behind, or you will drop them in midstream or, what is worse, overbalance and be drowned yourself” (CE 2: 228). Woolf sees in “the signs of the times,” among writers “scattered about in England, France and America,” developments that hail this lyric narrative form, a form conducive to the modern attitude toward life (CE 2: 229).

With the publication of *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* and with the initial ideas for *The Waves*, Woolf’s own work at this period is one such sign of the time. On
November 28, 1928, Woolf speculates on the kind of method she wants for the novel, writing in her diary,

what I want now to do is saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don’t belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated? (D 3: 209-10)

In The Waves, which deviates more than any of her other works from the “appalling narrative business” of the conventional realist, Woolf achieves what E.M. Forster describes as the two types of rhythm in his 1927 Aspects of the Novel. First, the “repetition plus variation” Forster finds in the rhythms of Proust’s work, where the recurrence of the signifiers of Swann’s desire accumulates new and different meanings (168). In The Waves, readers track the recurrence of significant events, objects, metaphors, sounds, visions, sensory experiences, and self-definitions across several axes: within one of the six characters’ monologues over the course of an episode or the course of the novel; across characters, as one voice affirms another’s by marking that character with a metaphor he or she has already identified with; and in relation to the italicized interludes that begin each episode and which describe a landscape but is devoid of any characters’ voices.

In this way, Woolf also achieves the second type of rhythm identified by Forster which creates an effect that he describes as “comparable to the effect of the Fifth Symphony as a whole, where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played,” as the three movements “all enter the mind at once, and extend one another into a common entity,” and this “new thing, is the symphony as a whole” that is
partly achieved “by the relation between the three big blocks of sound which the orchestra has been playing” (168). It is also achieved in the relation of the performers, conductor, and auditors, and ultimately leads to “a larger existence than was possible at the time” (169). This “larger existence” is evocative of Woolf’s emphasis on the lyric mode’s ability to enhance narrative by drawing us “further back from life” (224). Woolf, who reviewed Forster’s book, develops lyric narrative in late modernism with an increasing attention to the text’s relationship with the reader; it is this “new thing,” the “common entity” that is achieved in the performances and interpretations of the text by its readers, that becomes Woolf’s absorbing interest in her experimental fiction—from the taut composition of *The Waves* to the more permeable orchestration of *Between the Acts*.

Forster’s second type of rhythm emphasizes a gap, another “going over”: that is, the move from the orchestra’s playing, to silence, and, in the space that is opened, the work that “we” both hear and create. This trope—of the creation of a text, a silence or gap inviting the audience’s interpretation, and the audience’s taking up of the text—recurs throughout this study as a methodology of lyric narrative. Walter Benjamin has theorized this methodology using primarily visual metaphors; indeed, Susan Buck Morss has described Benjamin’s methodology in *The Arcades Project*, which he describes as “literary montage” (N1a,8: 460), as a “dialectics of seeing” (ix). The lyric narrative techniques of constellation and montage, either embedded in larger narrative movements or in counterpoint to a narrative progression, enable a dialectical vision. In refusing to “close the gap completely,” as Adorno wrote of Benjamin, lyric narrative emphasizes the “something else” that is created when the orchestra stops and “we” hear, see, and thus
realize together a vision not possible when we are either immersed in the real or in the
total work of art.

The emphasis on lyric in the counterpoints that structure Woolf’s *The Waves* are
illustrative of this dialectical vision and new emphasis on the reader’s active role. The
progression of *The Waves* is driven by a synthetic tension between the implied author and
reader, and the six speakers Bernard, Susan, Louis, Rhoda, Neville and Jinny. As James
Phelan has shown in *Narrative as Rhetoric*, the novel’s narrative progression serves the
text’s lyric aims; rather than focusing on this “narrative business,” Woolf develops a
matrix of six subjectivities for exploring how perception and discourse create the sense of
self. Phelan suggests that Woolf’s juxtaposition of mimetic (within the story world) and
synthetic (beyond the story, the interaction of author, text, and audience) dimensions
ultimately leads “to a double vision” (41). The “lyric utterances” of the six speakers
allow readers to deeply engage with the characters, exploring thematic issues such as “the
nature of identity, the difficulty of connecting with others” and so on; however, this
mimetic vision is juxtaposed with “with the impersonality of the interludes” (41). Woolf
is thus able to create “lyric moments” which her characters experience and readers
perform—“It will be dramatic, and yet not a play” (*CE* 2: 224). Simultaneously,
however, she creates a dialectical standpoint: drawn into the position of the implied
author via the self-less interludes, readers are able to critique the meaning of the lyric
moment and the networks of discourses informing the construction of the self. The
modernist lyric narrative is characterized by the tensions of this dual, or dialectical
vision.
Whereas Woolf’s self-reflexive lyric narratives tend to maintain a rigorous balance, H.D.’s prose work during the late twenties tends to accentuate an ambivalence regarding the tensions—aesthetic and philosophic—of this dialectical vision. In turning from imagist poetry to prose, H.D. attempts to give “the moment whole” (as Woolf writes in her diary). Indeed, a short story written and carefully revised in 1926 titled “The Moment” shows H.D.’s commitment to her experiment of turning from poetry and essay to fiction. Perhaps because of its excessive “narrative business” uneasily balanced against a profusion of purple patches, however, H.D. did not publish the story.12

Published in 1926, the second story of her novel *Palimpsest* (one of “three big blocks” of text, to paraphrase Forster), however, is strikingly similar in content to “The Moment.” Its publication signals H.D.’s growing confidence and ability in her lyric narrative prose; in making “the moment” more self-reflexive about the process of writing itself and in counterposing a story that emphasizes the lyric mode between two others that place a greater emphasis on the narrative mode, *Palimpsest* achieves a form that enables H.D. to take lyric departures into her characters’ psyches while grounding those departures in a historical and social context.

---

12 “The Moment” places three women (Myra, Elaine, Vanna) together in a room and follows a similar scenario of intrigue as the first half of *Palimpsest*’s “Murex,” discussed in chapter two. We read Vanna’s interior discourse in response to another woman’s question, “‘What use is your writing, anyway?’ It was this use. It made each moment a possible forerunner of the moment” (41). Near the story’s conclusion, when each woman’s different art has been challenged, this assertion of the importance of writing in fixing the moment is held up: “At least there was the courage toward creation. It did awfully matter. It did matter to Vanna for Vanna, it mattered to Vanna for Elaine. She wanted Elaine to admit their sisterhood” (43). Despite Vanna’s affirmative vision of the arts as a means for women to create a sisterhood that might overcome the narratives of destruction in their relationships with men in a patriarchal society, H.D.’s story also depicts this vision as utopian and the necessary support of the other women is made fleeting by their contingent ties to men and commerce. “The Moment” is also the name H.D. chose for the projected collection of short stories it is found in, as yet unpublished, in her papers at Yale.
In contrast to Woolf, however, H.D.’s prose is nearly always over “saturated” and thus likely to include some “waste” and “deadness.” Writing of *Palimpsest*, Robert McAlmon analyzes H.D.’s innovation in the novel with the same metaphor that Woolf uses when her narrator analyzes Mary Carmichael’s new novel in *A Room of One’s Own*—the writer as racehorse. According to McAlmon, “H.D.’s intellect […] is a bit wind-broken, somewhat the overstrung racehorse” as it “stumble[s] through the objective world,” but “once underway it takes the hurdles and is not the last to arrive at the goal-post” (243). McAlmon then raises the issue of an intellectual elite, noting that H.D.’s narrative pursuit is “high-bred,” not “to a manner modishly accepted because of ingrown customs, but high-bred towards an end; direct perception; direct origination; direct rejection of the parasitical fungi of ‘taste’ as understood because either Britain or America need pattern-minded types to ‘carry on the tradition’” (243). McAlmon points to the impasse of writers such as Woolf and H.D. who do see their artistic work as “high-bred towards an end”—that is, crafting a new form of the novel that would capture the subject in modernity—but are also troubled by the aesthetic aristocracy it implies.

He also accurately describes the gates H.D. must steer by in her narrative experimentation: the imagist lyric and realist narrative tradition. H.D. began writing poetry in the prewar era as a method of “direct perception; direct origination,” but her success was cordoned by the “pattern-minded” Ezra Pound, invested in branding schools of modernism (i.e. “H.D. Imagiste”). As McAlmon writes, by the 1920s, H.D. was

---

13 H.D. recounts an exchange with Pound in the British Museum in which he “scrawled ‘H.D. Imagiste’ at the bottom of the page” of “Hermes of the Ways,” thus launching her career (*End to Torment* 18). Pound and others admonished H.D. to carry on her prewar imagist poet’s reputation of dryad-like perfection. As Robert Spoo notes, H.D. both defied and heeded this advice: “she
“person enough for the now, for her, safe ‘harp with one string’ frozen lyric; and for prose also” (241). Relinquishing her “Imagiste” identity yet reluctant to founder in the popular marketplace, H.D.’s lyric narrative work in *Palimpsest* both identifies with and rejects the avant-garde. The poet-protagonist of its central story problematizes both the “pattern-minded types” who “carry on the tradition” as well as the intellectual elite who romanticize the need to “carry on” the avant-garde.

The tension of a personal and impersonal vision allows both Woolf and H.D. to engage with a larger philosophical project, one that is not merely a desire for novelty or the vanguard in the future of the novel. For Woolf and H.D., lyric narrative’s potential is not only aesthetic but epistemological and ethical; the “timeless” impersonal vision of the lyric mode is vitally rooted in the contingent, historical vision of personal narrative.

Forster concludes *Aspects of the Novel* with the same caveats regarding speculating about the novel’s future as in Woolf’s “The Narrow Bridge of Art” and H. Porter Abbott’s “The Future of All Narrative Futures.” Rather than speculate whether the novel will “become more or less realistic” or “be killed by the cinema,” Forster sees the novelists of the next two hundred years writing in an enormously changed context, but he believes they themselves will be essentially unchanged. “History develops, art stands still,” Forster writes (171-72). In this line of argument, history is marked (if not defined) by change, so that in the next two hundred years, “[w]e may harness the atom, we may land on the
moon, we may abolish or intensify warfare” (171). In contrast, the domain of the creative process is motionless, is marked as static.\textsuperscript{14} History is thus aligned with narrative, art with lyric.

Nonetheless, Forster questions this binary—particularly as it posits history as an inevitable repetition of catastrophes—in asking whether the “mechanism of the creative mind” might be altered: “Will the creative process itself alter? Will the mirror get a new coat of quicksilver? In other words, can human nature change?” (172). Entertaining the possibility that human nature might change, he locates artists as the principals in such change: “If human nature does alter it will be because individuals manage to look at themselves in a new way. Here and there people—a very few people, but a few novelists are among them—are trying to do this” (172). Institutions such as “organized religion, the state, the family in its economic aspect” have nothing to gain by a change in human nature and are conditioned by “history” to maintain the status quo (172-73). It is with individuals who “manage to look at themselves in a new way” that Forster’s possibility for change lies. Despite I.A. Richards’s prediction of the demise of imaginative literature, Forster holds that in “the instrument of contemplation […] contemplat[ing] itself” lies the way of “movement and even combustion for the novel, for if the novelist sees himself differently he will see his characters differently and a new system of lighting will result” (173). The artist-protagonists of Woolf’s \textit{To the Lighthouse} and \textit{The Waves} and of H.D.’s \textit{Palimpsest} see themselves as indeed instruments of contemplation, and they contemplate the ineffectualness as well as the power of the art they produce. The

\textsuperscript{14} By 1939, however, Forster’s view of the engine of history will change somewhat, although his belief in the creative impulse will not, as I discuss in the conclusion.
artist-protagonists of Woolf’s *Between the Acts* and H.D.’s *The Gift*, moreover, share the stage with the reader—the audience is required to know themselves as instruments of contemplation, contemplating themselves and their active or passive roles in history.

Woolf and H.D., like Forster, believe that by getting new modes of vision into the novel, a change in human nature is made possible. Woolf’s move is toward the broader vision that poetry grants her prose and H.D.’s move is from the timelessness of her imagist poetry toward the contingency of the present that prose grants her. In counterposing a timeless lyric vision with narrative’s historicity, lyric narrative enables a dialectical vision that can both invest audiences in a particular narrative of the world and invite their critique and creative engagement. Tentatively hazarding a “philosophy,” Forster writes, “I see these two movements of the human mind: the great tedious onrush known as history, and a shy crablike sideways movement” (173). These movements have been neglected because history seems “just a train full of passengers” and the “shy crablike sideways movement” of those in the train is too slow to be visible in increments of two hundred years (173). However, if the novelist had “the power or license to take a wider view,” seeing the crablike shiftings of the passengers in history, then “a new development of the novel” might also mean “the development of humanity” (174). The lyric narratives I examine aspire to a timeless “wider view” alongside the view of a passenger on the train of on-rushing history, with the hope that by creating new kinds of narratives in art, then new kinds of narratives might be possible for history.

What marks this progressive view of the arts’ potential to alter the progression of history as different from others’ views of arts’ potential in late modernism, however, is its refusal (in practice) of didactic commentary and the assumption of an ultimate truth, and
its reliance on audiences’ creative engagement. Woolf’s and H.D.’s experiments in prose—like Dulac’s in film and Benjamin’s in criticism—might be represented as emergent, half-completed bridges (or perhaps, “disappointed bridge[s]”—Stephen’s answer for “what is a pier” in *Ulysses* [2: 20]). The balance these figures sought in utilizing the lyric and narrative modes was not so much the structuralist’s dream of a perfectly balanced Roman arch, as it was a balance of composition and silence. The author’s efforts are to compose and frame elements, the “Refuse of History” according to Benjamin (N2,6: 461), in such a way that the audience will take up the material and the invitation to create, as Forster suggests, some “new thing” when the author falls silent. Of course, there is a leap of faith required, a high degree of risk for the author in refusing to “close the gap.” Nonetheless, I believe it is the ethics of the choice to fall silent (to refuse didactic closure and to invite the audience’s creative collaboration) and the sensation of responsibility the text thus engenders in audiences (who feel compelled to take up the unfinished work) that makes these texts so compelling today.

Edward Said’s last essay, “Untimely Meditations,” on Beethoven’s late work, offers a meditation on “late style” that characterizes the style and standpoint of these late modernist works and speaks to the aura of unfinished business in artists’ last works. It is a standpoint that, like Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” looks backwards toward the past while standing apart in the present, articulating a vision for a future audience. In describing one aspect of “late style,” Said writes, “[t]here is first of all the artist’s connection to his or her own time, or historical period, society and antecedents, how the

---

15 Benjamin’s angel sees from the standpoint of “timeless time,” but what he sees devastates, particularly because the angel is unable “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole” (with narrative?) “what has been smashed” (“Theses” 257).
aesthetic work, for all its irreducible individuality, is nevertheless a part—or, paradoxically, not a part—of the era in which it was produced,” and this, moreover, is not “simply a matter of sociological or political synchrony” but a matter having “to do with rhetorical or formal style” (1). Late style is characterized by “an antithetical relationship in the case of artists whose work challenges the aesthetic and social norms of their eras and is, so to speak, too late for the times, in the sense of superseding or transcending them” (1; emphasis added). Examples of “a late-style phenomenon” that are too late for the times in that they look to the past include modernism itself, particularly “artists such as Joyce and Eliot,” and philosophers such as Nietzsche, “the great prototype of a similarly ‘untimely’ stance” (1). The second aspect of late style that Said considers are “those late works” (Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, particularly) that “form an identifiable group and show marked evidence of a considerable transformation” in the artist’s compositional style (2). This aspect of late style has a great deal to do with old age, and it is worth noting that each of the authors of my study reflected on the possibility that these would indeed be their last works. Said quotes Hermann Broch on the style of old age:

[It] is not always a product of the years; it is a gift implanted along with his other gifts in the artist, ripening, it may be, with time, often blossoming before its season under the foreshadow of death, or unfolding of itself even before the approach of age or death: it is the reaching of a new level of expression, […] such as the Art of the Fugue which Bach in his old age dictated without having a concrete instrument in mind, because what he had to express was either beneath or beyond the audible surface of music. (2; emphasis added)

This study will begin with the Art of the Fugue, that is, how writers such as Woolf and H.D. create a kind of fugue writing “because what [they] had to express was either beneath or beyond the audible” surface of their era. What I hope to chart is the
blossoming or unfolding of lyric narrative techniques by a particular group of artists and thinkers whose works in the period of late modernism evidence the “untimely” aspects of late style Said describes. These works are paradoxically a part of and apart from their era. This study will end with an examination of their last works of late modernism, works written during the Second World War, as “gift[s] implanted” that are particularly untimely in that they look to the distant past in light of the present moment, but are directed not at an audience in the “now” of the catastrophe of the Blitz but to an audience in an after—that is, to us, when the status quo threatens to be preserved.

Said fortuitously quotes Adorno’s essay “Beethoven’s Late Style”; it is a late essay for Adorno as well, one that evidences a ripened maturity that I want to contrast to his youthful estimation of Benjamin’s methodology:

> The caesurae, however, the abrupt stops which characterize the latest Beethoven more than any other feature, are those moments of breaking free; the work falls silent as it is deserted, turning its hollowness outward. Only then is the next fragment added, ordered to its place by escaping subjectivity and colluding for better or worse with what has gone before, and can be exorcized only by the figure they form together. This illuminates the contradiction whereby the very late Beethoven is called both subjective and objective, while the light in which alone it glows is subjective. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As a dissociative force he tears them apart in time, perhaps in order to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes. (2)

Said provides a lucid translation of Adorno’s “gnomic” argument, and his two points identify the aesthetic-historical aspects of the late modernist lyric narratives that I analyze. First, late style is not about reconciliation, elegy, and nostalgia: rather, “there is violence, experimental energy and, most important, a refusal to accept any idea of a healing, inclusive restfulness that comes at the end of a fruitful career” (2). Second, “the late-style phenomenon overturns our ideas and experiences about the coherence, organic
completeness, the wholeness of the work, which is tied together (if that’s the right way of putting it) in unexpected ways” (2). The essential element of late works by Woolf, H.D., and Benjamin are the “caesurae,” “those moments of breaking free” that turn outward toward the audience and that confound “organic completeness” by interrupting the work of art with the real, thus revealing a paradoxical coherence in the flow between them. Nonetheless, I want to also pay attention to the ethical paradox of late-style caesurae, this refusal to close the gap, as does Said in noting that Beethoven’s “Ninth ended up tragically in the employ of twentieth-century German nationalism at its worst, but it also lent itself to the struggles against apartheid and totalitarianism” (3). In turning to lyric narrative as a response to the crises of the 1930s, Woolf, H.D., Dulac, and Benjamin recognized the risks of the technique, that the openings of their texts might invite an audience to take up their texts in a performance and interpretation that runs counter to their liberal, feminist, humanist beliefs. Their efforts then would be to provide enough direction and structure to elicit from audiences the kind of critical and creative response they desired, without, however, denying audiences’ creative departures and differing standpoints. Moreover, in taking this necessary risk, these texts exert an even greater appeal on the present-day reader who discovers these “untimely” works from another era to be extremely timely to their own. As Forster writes, “when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played” (168), and it is precisely that something that we have always desired to hear, the “something that forever escapes” (Woolf, “Phases of Fiction” 97). In choosing silence, the text allows the audience to take center stage, to have an essential role in making visible, or audible, its implanted “gift,” to take up the work of completing the narrow bridge of art.
CHAPTER 2:

FUGUES IN WORDS: VIRGINIA WOOLF AND H.D.

2.1 Lyric Narrative in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”

The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. (Between the Acts 220)

This epigraph provides an adroit map for reading Virginia Woolf’s lyric narrative experiments. It captures Woolf’s fondness for a fugue’s exposition; one note’s call prompts the answer of an other. It expresses Woolf’s interplay of form and content. Here, as throughout her work, Woolf evokes metaphors of surface (“flower gathering”) and depth (“descending to wrestle with the meaning”) in order to give them a twist, privileging their productive tension rather than opposition. Woolf’s tune is the synthesis of these various rhetorical levels and the complex harmonies of multiple auditors. Moreover, her auditors are not mere passive receivers of the tune, but active participants

---

1 This moment in Between the Acts marvelously captures the rhetorical effects of the “fugue writing” I discuss in this chapter. Nonetheless, the rhetorical situation of recording an audience’s reaction to fugue-like music accrues more complex and ambivalent connotations in Between the Acts’ setting of the Second World War and the much broader denotation of “they” and “ourselves” in the passage, in contrast to the smaller circle of characters in the 1920s works.
who create the tune in their listening: “ourselves went forward […] all comprehending; all enlisted” (220). That this line from her last novel strikingly reflects the form and themes of many of Woolf’s works, particularly her short fiction, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, attests to the centrality of lyric narrative—and the exemplary model of the fugue—in Woolf’s oeuvre, from 1919 to 1941. As Patricia Laurence has noted, the rhythm of the fugue as “an aspect of feeling and form” has been “largely unexplored in Woolf’s work” (239). Woolf’s rhythm, according to Laurence, is an “undertow in language and might be defined as being composed of auditory, visual, or thematic counterpoint with different dimensions of mind and the novel being played off against one another in varying combinations” (240). This “undertow,” an alternate or counterposing progression to the conventional narrative progression, might also be defined as the lyric departures of her narrative experiments.

Of her short fiction, “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” offers an incisive look at Woolf’s innovation in lyric narrative form between *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Reprinted in 1944 with some revision as “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points” in *A Haunted House*, the story first appeared in New York’s *The Forum* in January 1928.¹ The genesis of the story can be tracked to a diary entry in 1926, a period that marks a new confidence in Woolf’s work as a modernist artist and theorist. By reading the story in the context of Woolf’s evolving narrative theories, I propose that the story represents Woolf’s move toward the possibilities of the lyric moment in narrative for changing the direction and shape of fiction. It is a move in which Woolf shows how

¹ Although citing *A Haunted House*’s edition, to avoid confusion with the collection *Moments of Being*, I refer to the story’s shorter original title.
thematic content (love between women) and form (lyrical expansion rather than linear narrative progression) are in a dialectical tension.\textsuperscript{2}

The dialectics of form, rhetorical address, and content represented in the epigraph from *Between the Acts* are a focus of this story. As narrative progression develops according to a progressing lyric vision in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Woolf enlists readers to examine two parallel structures. First, the relationship of the subject’s perception and objects of perception in the construction of identity. Second, the reader’s and implied author’s rhetorical relationship in creating narrative. The two different levels on which readers go forward are the story’s narrative dimensions: the mimetic (the characters Julia Craye and Fanny Wilmot) and the synthetic (its form transposes the form of a fugue). Taking Woolf’s cues, I examine how the mimetic and synthetic dimensions (that is, the story world and the world of author and audience) work together to enlist readers in Woolf’s lyric narrative innovation. Moreover, this experiment both models and explores a modernist-feminist aesthetic: the feminist ethic the story evokes is rooted in her development of modernist lyric narrative. The play of voice and form enables Woolf to depart from conventional narrative progression to explore epistemological questions. This alternative ethic emerges in the portrayal of a young woman perceiving and composing portraits that suggest narratives not sanctioned by a patriarchal culture.

\textsuperscript{2} My use of “dialectical” to describe Woolf’s thematics and style does not connote a hierarchical binary opposition nor a strictly Marxist dialectic, but follows the more dialogic “dialectics” of Bakhtin and Benjamin. In the *Arcades Project*, for example Benjamin’s “dialectical image” is “the historical object of interpretation,” which the “the collector” takes up in his or her “own particular time and place, therefore throwing a pointed light on what has been,” so that the image is “actualized” in the viewer’s “now” (Eiland xii). Both Woolf and Benjamin plot a progression of dialectical images which, in their suspension, bring together a vision of the realities and limitations of the historical moment/object as well as a vision of unrealized possibilities.
Following James Phelan’s model of rhetoric, one can investigate the dual rhetorical dimensions of the story’s progression by tracking the parallel between, first, Fanny’s act of composing a vision from the form and subject supplied by her piano teacher Julia Craye and, second, the implied reader’s parallel act of composing a vision from the form and content the implied Woolf has devised. Recalling Phelan’s rhetorical definition of narrative—“somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (18), the story not only accents the reader’s relationship to the voices of Woolf’s narrative, but also the “someone” who has heretofore been stationed behind the curtain—the author. Woolf’s authorial identity is “seductive” (“Slater’s” 105) precisely because of its destabilization of the “authority” of the implied author and its invocation to the reader’s authority.3

The fabula of the story seems fairly simple: Fanny Wilmot has been listening to her piano teacher Julia Craye play a Bach fugue, when a rose pinned to her dress falls to the floor. As Fanny searches for the pin on the floor, she thinks about Julia Craye and composes the story of her life in short scenes and sketches from fragments of dialogue she has heard from or about Julia Craye. The story is completed when Fanny finds the pin and “sees” Julia. The telling of the story, however, is hardly simple. When, in the

---

3 While I cite Phelan’s more recent *Living to Tell about It*, his earlier *Narrative as Rhetoric* describes his initial model of rhetoric as one in which an author extends “a multidimensional (aesthetic, emotive, ideational, ethical, political) invitation to a reader” through the narrative text, and the reader “in turn, seeks to do justice to the complexity of the invitation and then responds” (xi). Phelan moves from this model to one in which “the lines between author, reader, and text become blurred,” viewing rhetoric as “the synergy occurring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (xii). Woolf’s story suggests a similar progression; ironically, the carefully wrought patterns of her text foreground the blurring of “the lines,” invite the reader to meditate on the complex rhetorical and epistemological nature of the process of creating and responding to art, and portrays within the story world the “synergy” Phelan describes in order to invite the ideal reader to “see” and actively create in response.
story’s opening, Fanny first stoops “with her ears full of the music,” that music includes, on the one hand, Miss Craye’s assertion and question—“Slater’s pins have no points—don’t you always find that?”—and on the other hand, “the last chord of the Bach fugue” struck by Miss Julia Craye (103). When the reader subsequently discovers that the line “Slater’s pins have no points—don’t you always find that?” becomes a recurring theme in Fanny’s thoughts, its initial introduction with a Bach fugue illuminates the fugue-like structure of the story. Nonetheless, the function of the fugue is not simply a performer’s device.

Woolf’s use of a fugue-like pattern of theme and variation to structure the telling of the relationship between her two female characters suggests the possibilities as well as the limits of narrative form and its relation to an “ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (“Modern Fiction” 106). The instability of the story unfolds in Fanny’s attempt to “see” Julia. Fanny’s mimetic dimension—our sense of her as a “real” person—is realized in a progression of Fanny’s visions of Julia, a series of imagined portraits that turn upon a particular mimetic trait of Julia. The particular focus of Fanny’s vision includes the life choices that she sees as defining Julia. Thus, Fanny’s vision of Julia’s choice to live alone (how she reads Julia in fact, and imagines her in fiction) develops a thematic dimension of the story alongside Fanny’s own mimetic dimension for the reader. The movement of the two characters’ visions toward accord constitutes the progression of the story world.

As a narrative progresses, audiences follow and respond to the movement of instabilities (“unsettled matters involving elements of story”) and tensions (“unsettled matters involving elements of discourse such as unequal knowledge among authors, narrators, and audiences […] or matters of different values and perceptions”) (Phelan, Living 19-20).
For example, Fanny fabricates a courting scene from Julia’s past: she “make[s Mr. Sherman] call for [Miss Craye], by appointment” and then row her across the Serpentine, to emphasize the disjunction in the visions of the rejected Mr. Sherman and the independent, attractive Miss Craye (107). Fanny composes a contrapuntal chord in imagination which her own moment in fact will then revise. In Fanny’s sketch, Miss Craye and Mr. Sherman both experience “a moment of horror, of disillusionment, of revelation” when she rejects him, but their visions are radically discordant: Miss Craye focuses on beauty, “I can’t have it. I can’t possess it,” and Mr. Sherman focuses on his bruised ego (108). In contrast, the final chord the reader registers, which marks Fanny’s and Miss Craye’s moment, will be struck in harmony as a moment of triumph, “of ecstasy,” of revelation (110).

The implied author’s choice of form, a “narrated monologue” (Cohn 14) in a pattern like that of a fugue, and her emphasis on the process of vision and understanding creates the synthetic tension of the text. That is, the tension of being immersed in the unfolding narrative while also registering its musical construction. The participation of the reader in developing a vision of Julia, a process that simultaneously makes Fanny visible to the reader, turns upon this synthetic tension. This tension is particularly marked by Woolf’s choice of telling the story through a heterodiegetic (as opposed to first person) narrator whose distance from the implied author is undetectable and whose voice is generally difficult to distinguish from Fanny’s vision. The implied reader, then,

---

5 In *Narrative as Rhetoric*, Phelan’s definition of heterodiegetic draws on Gérard Genette’s theories: “narration in which the narrator exists at a different level of (fictional) existence from the characters,” as opposed to homodiegetic: “narration in which the narrator exists at the same
is to progress like Fanny in an attempt to master the combinations necessary to “see,” or
see with, the implied author composing the text; the accord of Woolf’s aesthetic vision
and the implied reader’s is the consummation devoutly to be wished that underscores the
lyric nature of the text.

2.2 Cultivating a Lyric Vision: Woolf’s Readers and the Work of Art in The Waves

Woolf’s evocation of the form of the fugue entitles readers to a well-tempered,
ready vocabulary for describing the formal elements of the story’s pattern. Bach’s fugue
supplies a form and subject for Woolf’s vertical departure from linear narrative
progression. The fugue provides a ground for Woolf to figure her own self-conscious
play on the limits of formal conventions and to perform there a lyric subversion—perhaps
with camp or satiric connotations in that performance. Indeed, Woolf’s diary supports
such a reading of the story’s use of form. In December 1926, Woolf finalizes her ideas
about a story of “two women”: “No attempt is to be made to realise the character.
Sapphism is to be suggested. […] My own lyric vein is to be satirised” (D 3: 131).

“Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” as Woolf noted in the margins of her diary, marks her

level of existence as the characters. […] When the character-narrator is also the protagonist, as in
A Farewell to Arms, the homodiegetic narration can be further specified as autodiegetic” (217).

My study takes up the proposal Edward W. Said makes in his Musical Elaborations which
courages scholars of music to avail themselves “of what deconstruction, cultural history,
narratology, and feminist theory have to offer” (xvi). His readings of Bach’s fugues, Beethoven’s
late sonatas, as well as the performer Glenn Gould and writer Thomas Mann inform my analysis.
Steven Paul Scher’s preface to the collection Music and Text: Critical Inquiries surveys the
current state of interdisciplinary study between music and literature and the essays he introduces
“demonstrate how musical and literary studies can combine forces effectively on the common
ground of contemporary critical theory and interpretive practice” (xiv). As contributions by Peter
J. Rabinowitz, Paul Apers, and Anthony Newcomb suggest, narrative theory has been a major
force in the new interchange between musical and literary scholarship.
own progression from the first maturity of the new “method” in *To the Lighthouse*, her gambol in *Orlando*, and her launch toward the “play-poem idea” of *The Waves* (*D* 3: 131). This is not to suggest that Woolf invents her lyric narrative style in the late twenties. Rather, the differences between the more conventional, Victorian narrative of *Night and Day* (1919) and the modernist lyric narrative techniques of *Jacob’s Room* (1922) marks Woolf’s decisive striking out for a new narrative form. Whereas the short, experimental fiction “Kew Gardens” had been a pivotal experiment with form at the beginning of the decade, in the later half of the 1920s, “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” shows how Woolf again tries out various combinations of narrative and lyric on the scales of her short fiction in order to understand what innovations had become conventional.

Woolf’s deliberateness in cultivating a lyric narrative form is performed in this short story and is articulated in two essays Woolf wrote during the same period, “The Art of Fiction” (1927) and “Phases of Fiction” (written between 1925 and 1929). In the earlier essay, Woolf calls upon the English novelist to leave “the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure” in order for fiction to “become a work of art” (*CE* 2: 55). This work of art, however, must not neglect “life” in pursuing too narrowly the “path of aesthetic duty” as Henry James has (53). In “Phases of Fiction,” Woolf uses the trope of recording “the impressions made upon the mind by reading a certain number of novels in succession” (56). Her readerly judgments serve less as guides for reading than to clarify Woolf’s own evolving theory of fiction—a theory with equal emphasis on the reader’s relationship with the text and author. Thus, the pleasure of reading Henry James would seem to come
from the absolution to “feel with his characters” since the reader is cut off from “the responses which are called out in actual life” (82). We are instead captivated by the power of the implied author: “we are amused by [his mind’s] power to make patterns […] It is a pleasure somewhat akin to the pleasure of mathematics or the pleasure of music” (82). However, this admirable presence is precisely the problem, since “readers resent” having to “feel” “the suave showman, skilfully manipulating his characters; nipping, repressing; dexterously evading and ignoring, where a writer of greater depth or natural spirits would have taken the risk which his material imposes” (82).

Woolf, in playing her role as “common reader” here, writes a reader-oriented criticism that parallels the central thematics of “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and *The Waves*. These lyric narratives emphasize the activities of reading (perceiving) and writing (composing one’s identity and perceptions) over plot. In both texts, readers observe and participate in a character’s vision of other characters’ compositions of their lives. In *The Waves*, Louis tells his struggle and burden, that he “must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads […] the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day” (202). Throughout the text, Louis is “conscious of flux, of disorder,” but he also perceives patterns, for example, “the rhythm of the eating-house,” and his monologue (which the reader also perceives as Woolf’s synthetic creation) is

---

7 In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn discusses *The Waves* as exemplary of a generic hybrid, the prose poem (263-65). Cohn shows that “the ‘dramatic soliloquies’” of its six characters (who use the tense that George T. Wright has called “lyric present” tense, the “‘timeless’ dimension associated with gestures in a poem”) “cannot be understood as realistic reproductions of figural thought or speech, but must be understood as poetry fashioned by a single creative mind” (264-65). Woolf’s “play-poem-novel,” with its soliloquies and italicized “interludes” make up “a unique experiment. It works variations on the interior monologue form that do not belong to the main stream of the fictional genre” (265).
itself successful in weaving a “cable” out of chaos. The rhythms of the monologue reflect Louis’s ordering vision, thus we hear at two levels (Louis’s and Woolf’s) the creation of harmony from disparate threads as his monologue weaves waitresses and “average men, including her rhythm in their rhythm,” from his vantage as a poet who can hear the “harmony complete” and “reduce you to order” (93-4). Louis, who identifies himself foremost as a working man, contrasts his struggle to “fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel” and thus to “fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavour” (39-40), to Bernard’s and Neville’s transitory and personal ontological compositions. However, the reader also hears Bernard’s and Neville’s reflections on Louis’s vision (how he reads and composes his being in the world). Bernard, whose compositions revel in the evanescent and intangible rather than the enduring, enriches his observations by taking the point of view of his friends: “What malevolent yet searching light would Louis throw?”; what is it “[t]hat I see and Neville does not see?” (91). Neville compares Bernard’s fecundity to his own preference to “draw the red serge curtain close” around himself and one sympathetic other (87). Nonetheless, Neville offers a model of the collective or self-less lyric voice when he contrasts his vision to Louis’s, saying, “We are not judges”; while granting Louis the need for “violence” and “a plot,” Neville himself holds that, “This is poetry if we do not write it” (196-97).

Thus, Woolf’s readers observe how this matrix of identities is mutually informed—itself the progression of the “novel” rather than a conventional plot. Neville offers a philosophy for reading the poem of life and one’s interaction with others: “To read this poem one must have myriad eyes […]. One must put aside antipathies and jealousies and
not interrupt” (198). Unlike Louis, whose force of will and personality marshals the poem into order, for Neville, one must put the self aside in order to “let down one’s net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry” (199). Bernard also observes and respects Louis’s attempts to forge a steel ring of experience, yet Woolf’s emphasis in showing Bernard’s vision of Louis is to show Bernard engaged in simultaneously composing his own identity as a writer whose words are like spirals of bubbles or silver fish rising. It is this matrix of perception with its themes, variations, affirmations and counterpoints that is the unique structure of *The Waves*. Woolf’s characters model a mode of lyrical reading—withholding judgment and observing the possible constellations that make up an other. The ethic of this kind of reading, not merely a toleration but a creative appreciation of otherness, enriches the characters’ subjectivity as they compose their own lives in harmony or counterpoint. Moreover, these are subjectivities that we as readers of Woolf’s text are engaged in reading in relation to our own self composition.

Louis, who attempts to enclose their moment together in a perfect, fully visible “globe,” evokes Woolf’s admiration of Henry James’s craft, but Bernard’s vision expresses her assertion that the flux of life eludes such rigidity. Bernard’s final soliloquy, which depicts a poet attempting to tell the story of his life, satirizes the falsity of narrative convention and the inviolability of the work of art: “Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we can turn about in our fingers. Let us

---

8 The metaphor of fishing (often in reference to the unconscious or the yet uncodified) and the image of a “net” is key in both *The Waves* and “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” and throughout Woolf’s work, as a metaphor for the creative process. As chapter two will further explore, H.D. also relies on this metaphor.
pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story” (251).\(^9\) Woolf writes in her diary, on November 28, 1928, of the desirable sense of the “whole” that such a view of life affords:

I ask myself sometimes whether one is not hypnotized, as a child by a silver globe, by life; & whether this is living. Its very quick, bright, exciting. But superficial perhaps. I should like to take the globe in my hands & feel it quietly, round, smooth, heavy. & so hold it, day after day. I will read Proust I think. I will go backwards and forwards. \(D\ 3: 209\)

Woolf’s fiction depicts how seductive the “steel ring” of Louis’s writing and the “series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged” \(CE\ 2: 106\) of Henry James’s writing are in composing life. Nonetheless, her characters and the style of her fiction take up the Proustian line, acknowledging the desire for a comprehensive life narrative as well as its fabrication, moving “backwards and forwards.” The moment that Louis seeks to hold still, to fix in life, is “blown full” by the observations of the same moment by five other consciousnesses (“Phases of Fiction” 82); their observations further emphasize the role of the other in composing the meaning of a life’s moment. Although I will return to these phases of fiction in Woolf’s cultivation of a lyric mode of reading-writing, I will now examine the fugue-like form of “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” in order to suggest that Woolf writes the story at this point of departure from the “measure of Henry James’s greatness,” his gift of “so definite a world, so distinct and peculiar a beauty that we cannot rest satisfied but want to experiment further with these extraordinary perceptions,

\(^9\) Critics such as Robert O. Richardson and J. W. Graham have argued that the book is Bernard’s “autobiographical monologue” (Cohn 265). However, Woolf carefully keeps the text open, refusing the reader the satisfying resolution of being able to attribute the novel to Bernard’s single consciousness. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s artist Lily expresses a similar theory: Lily reflects, “Beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life—froze it” (177).
to understand more and more, but to be free from the perpetual tutelage of the author’s presence” (82-3).

2.3 The Art of Fugue

*fugue*, n. [from French fugue, an adaptation of the Italian fuga, literally ‘flight’; from the Latin fuga related to fugere, to flee] 1. ‘A polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects or themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and introduced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices’ (Stainer and Barrett). *double fugue* (1880 GROVE Dict. Mus. I. 459 Double Fugue, a common term for a fugue on two subjects, in which the two start together) *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Ed.\(^\text{10}\)

Despite her critique of his style in “The Art of Fiction” and “Phases of Fiction,” Woolf’s story initially suggests Henry James’s skillful manipulation. The reader finds a transposition of a fugue-like structure in the story’s elaborate sequence of nested episodes between the pin lost and found. Opening with an initial tonic/dominant relationship, the story that follows is a series of proposed answers in counterpoint to Julia Craye’s invitation—developmental episodes of Fanny’s imagination.

In the primary exposition of the story, the first call or statement of the subject, is the opening quoted line of Julia Craye’s dialogue, “Slater’s pins have no points—don’t you always find that?” (103). Fanny’s response to this call rhythmically parallels Miss Craye’s rhetorical statement-interrogative form: “Did Miss Craye actually go to Slater’s and buy pins then, Fanny Wilmot asked herself, transfixed for a moment” (103). The

\(^{10}\) The definition of a fugue in *The New Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music* states: “A composition, or compositional technique, in which a theme (or themes) is extended and developed mainly by imitative counterpoint” (274). In the “exposition” “the main theme or ‘subject’ is announced in the tonic, after which the second ‘voice’ enters with the answer, i.e. the same theme at the dominant (or subdominant) pitch […] while the first may proceed to a counter-subject” (274).
narrator’s “transfixed” is significant in marking Fanny’s psychic, fugue state departure from the linear narrative progression of the story world into the “timeless,” lyric dimension of aesthetic creation. Indeed, Fanny’s imagined scenes of Julia are generally in the present tense associated with lyric poetry. Fanny is provoked by the evocation of Miss Craye’s possible ordinariness: “Did she stand at the counter waiting like anybody else, and was she given a bill with coppers wrapped in it, and did she slip them into her purse and then, an hour later, stand by her dressing table and take out the pins? What need had she of pins?” (103). Fanny’s answer is her observation of Julia Craye’s character and a codetta pronouncement concerning the world of Julia Craye: “What need had she of pins—Julia Craye—who lived, it seemed in the cool glassy world of Bach fugues,” which transitions to a counter-subject seamlessly, “playing to herself what she liked, and only consenting to take one or two pupils at the Archer Street College of Music (so the Principal, Miss Kingston, said) as a special favour to herself, who had ‘the greatest admiration for her in every way’” (103). Thus, the call and answer that is the subject of the exposition as well as the entire piece (“Slater’s pins have no points” and Fanny’s answer to Julia’s invitation of “—don’t you always find that?”) includes the counter-subject of Miss Kingston’s “little character sketch” which Fanny recalls and develops in subsequent sketches of her own (104).

These early sketches in the exposition suggest a certain virtuosity of the implied author, a subtle “showman” as Woolf says of James, and thus a slight, though not ironic or critical, distance of implied reader and implied author from the character’s vision. Fanny’s ventriloquizing of Kingston creates this distance as it leads the reader to question Fanny’s as well as the narrator’s own accord or discord with Kingston’s view of Miss
Craye. The beginning of the next episode is marked by a restatement of the subject that incorporates Kingston’s statement that none of the Crayes had married: “Perhaps then, Fanny Wilmot thought, looking for the pin, Miss Craye said that about ‘Slater’s pins having no points,’ at a venture. None of the Crayes had ever married. She knew nothing about pins—nothing whatever” (104). Having resolved Julia Craye’s knowledge of pins in the exposition (Julia doesn’t have any need of pins), here Fanny uses that resolution and Miss Kingston’s counter-subject (Julia’s single status) in order to further interrogate the meaning behind Julia’s call. The expository episode (Julia’s opening subject, Fanny’s reaction, Fanny’s voicing of Miss Kingston) is followed then by a sequence of Fanny’s variations. In this sequence, fragments of dialogue (Miss Kingston’s, Miss Craye’s) serve as subjects for Fanny to counterpoint in developing possible portraits of Miss Craye. Each episode begins with a return to the lost pin and then follows a rhythm and elaboration of variations on the chosen theme and then is capped by the codetta of a restatement of the original dialogue. The middle section of Woolf’s fugue-like story, then, can be read as having three primary episodes.

The first episode, described above, develops and restates the following themes: the “pane of glass which separated them from other people” (104); the same “look” that characterizes Julia and her late brother Julius that seems to say of transitory beauty “I can’t reach you—I can’t get at you” (105); and Julia’s likeness to her “odd” brother, “the ‘famous archaeologist’” (105).11 As the story progresses and Fanny’s musings rely less on others’ observation, the note of satire no longer shadows the foreground, and the

11 Since Woolf models Julia Craye on her Greek tutor in youth, Clara Pater, there is a probable likeness of Julius to Clara’s brother, Walter Pater (D 3:106).
tension between reader and implied author recedes. A smooth transition from a more authorial to a more figural third-person narration parallels Fanny’s ascending powers of imagination.

The second episode is prefaced by a codetta of the previous episode’s close. The statement, “But whenever she spoke of Julius, or heard him mentioned, that was the first thing that came to mind; and it was a seductive thought; there was something odd about Julius Craye” (105), moves to a restatement of the over-arching subject—“Fanny searched for the pin” (106)—which is a return to the present moment of the story-time.12 In the codetta, Fanny associates Julius’s “odd” look with Julia’s look at the present moment, “as she sat half turned on the music stool, smiling” (105), and introduces the themes of the second episode. Fanny observes Julia’s characteristic “clutch of the hand” holding the fallen carnation which signifies a “perpetual frustration,” since the press of Julia’s hands may “increase all that was most brilliant in the flower,” “but she [Miss Craye] did not possess it” (105-06).13 The second episode’s themes, which vacillate between Fanny’s recollections of Julia’s speech and Fanny’s own musings, proceed: “It was the only use of men, she had said. Was it for that reason then, Fanny wondered, […] that she had never married?” (106); “Much the nicest part of London—Kensington,” Miss Craye’s words which Fanny elaborates in imagining the attempted courtship of

12 Notably, *The Forum* does not include the phrase “and it was a seductive thought” (105). Instead, the line reads: “But whenever she spoke of Julius, or heard him mentioned, that was the first thing that came to mind: there was something odd about Julius Craye” (59). The addition of “and it was a seductive thought” just at the codetta, a pause for reflection, further suggests an ambiguity between narrator’s voice and Fanny’s vision through stylistic contagion.

13 Oddly, the fallen flower has changed from a “rose” to a carnation; it seems unlikely that Woolf’s shift was unintentional, given that it appears both in the 1928 publication and in *A Haunted House*. Janet Winston, who writes tellingly of the Sapphic implications of the flower imagery in the story, does not address this change.
“young men” in Miss Craye’s youth (107); and, finally, a restatement of Julia’s gesture of clutching the flower which Fanny interprets as “I can’t have it, I can’t possess it” (108).

The beginning of the third episode is marked by Fanny’s reflection on her own imaginative power in a return to narrative story-time and a restatement of the expository subject: “The setting of that [courtship] scene could be varied as one chose, Fanny Wilmot reflected. (Where had that pin fallen?)” (108). This episode continues the fluctuating voices of the previous: Fanny muses on Julia’s phrase about men/husbands “They’re ogres” (108), and Julia’s statement, “It was so beautiful last Friday […] that I determined I must go there” (109). In contrast to the previous episodes, Fanny’s musings are imaginatively sharper, deeper, and even more eagerly sympathetic. Compare, for instance, the first episode’s portrayal of Julia, “‘Stars, sun, moon,’ [Julia’s look] seemed to say, ‘the daisy in the grass, fires, frost on the window-pane, my heart goes out to you’” (104), with the third episode’s vision of Julia deciding on a walk, “As it was, the tug-of-war was perpetual—on the one side the nightingale or the view which she loved with passion […] on the other the damp path or the horrid long drag up a steep hill which would certainly make her good for nothing next day and bring on one of her headaches” (109). The faint resonance of a bad lyric poem’s sentimentality, the satiric note of “these are a few of my favorite things” in the first example, derives from Fanny’s imagination being positioned opposite, looking through the pane of glass at Julia. The second example marks Fanny’s assumption of Julia’s consciousness in order to narrate her hypothesis; she has taken up the role of composer and now takes up the freedoms of voicing Julia’s vision which that role grants her: “When, therefore, from time to time, she [Julia] managed her forces adroitly […]” (109).
As she develops each portrait in the third episode through three “image-plots” (Lilienfeld 125)—Julia’s relief in the refusal to endanger her independent habits by marriage, Julia’s life long battle with headaches, and Julia’s passion for “views and birds” (109)—Fanny secures each vision with an affirmation, a “yes” (108-09). The fourth portrait, which describes “one’s” view of Julia posits “pity” as the appropriate answer to the theme of Julia’s determination “to visit Hampton Court—alone,” does not end in a “yes” (109). It thus sets up the final episode with a contrapuntal note. For, after trying on this answer of pity—“one pitied her for the thing she never asked pity for [her health…] one pitied her for always doing everything alone” (109)—the final episode, the coda, refutes that counter-subject of pity with a strong “No” and proposes instead an affirmation of Julia’s aloneness (110).

The final episode begins: “Fanny Wilmot saw the pin; she picked it up. She looked at Miss Craye. Was Miss Craye so lonely? No, Miss Craye was steadily, blissfully, if only for that moment, a happy woman” (110). A restatement of Miss Craye’s look within the narrative’s story-time unfolds from “Fanny had surprised her in a moment of ecstasy,” and a final chord unites Fanny’s lyric inner-time and the narrative story-time, as Fanny sees “back and back into the past behind her” and captures the being of Julia Craye “for a moment” (110). The final stretto answer closes the story, as the reiteration of Miss Craye’s initial question is a reiteration of Fanny’s silent affirmation: “‘Slater’s pins have no points,’ Miss Craye said, laughing queerly and relaxing her arms, as Fanny Wilmot pinned the flower to her breast with trembling fingers” (111). The purpose of the episodes, why Fanny develops possible portraits of Miss Craye, coincides with the purpose Fanny posits behind Julia Craye’s initial interrogative statement: in
developing these portraits of life episodes, Fanny is ultimately composing an affirmative answer to Julia Craye’s invitation to sympathy and intimacy.

Woolf’s choice to specify that Miss Craye plays a Bach fugue as a treat for her favorite student is apt not only in her stylistic transposition, but also thematically, since Bach often wrote his fugues for the purposes of teaching students and to demonstrate the complex varieties possible in the new tempered tuning. The conspiratorial tone of the mentor-student relationship is established between implied author and reader, as Woolf transposes a musical form associated either with a male public sphere (music’s classical tradition) or with the female private sphere of finishing-school lessons (one thinks of the tormented music of the Academy piece Mary Jane plays in James Joyce’s “The Dead”). Woolf makes use of the fugue-like form to tell a story of a young woman’s creative subversion of conventional gendered expectations through the example of her muse and mentor. Moreover, Woolf’s use of this form allows her to inspire her own readers to experiment with narrative conventions.

Just as students of a fugue study questions of temporality, voice, and progression (the fugue’s exposition, long middle section, and coda), Woolf’s readers are prompted to examine her experiment in narrative.14 Lawrence Kramer compares the functions of repetition in music and poetry: when “perceived almost subliminally, repetition is largely responsible for the heightened feeling of interwovenness, the tangible sense of continuity

---

14 My transposition of musicological to narratological terminology is based upon the discussions of “fugue” and “counterpoint” in The New Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music and Lawrence Kramer’s useful interdisciplinary model (drawing from “phenomenology, psychoanalysis, semiology” and “forms of critical reading and musical analysis” to “speak of music and poetry in the same language, wherever such a language may be possible”) in Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After (viii).
and organic relatedness, that sets musical and poetic forms apart from others” (25). In reading Woolf’s episodes in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” it is useful to note Bach’s development and use of special devices in the composition of the *Art of Fugue*. Bach’s composition began “with simple fugues” or “‘contrapunctus’, progressing through ‘counter-fugues’, double fugues and triple fugues, with interpolated canons and culminating in a mirror fugue,” and its printed version increased “by (among other things) two canons, a fourth simple fugue and most notably a closing quadruple fugue” (Wolff 163). Bach’s tremendous permutation and combination of episodes as a teaching device recommends Woolf’s particular attraction for her own vertical departure from linear narrative progression. When “perceived almost subliminally” the formal innovation merely contributes to our sense of a lyrical story, but when the synthetic dimension of the story is studied (particularly as it draws attention to itself) it contributes to the reader’s sense of narrative possibilities.

The experimental and pedagogical associations of fugues also prompt a reading of Woolf’s story as a personal compositional exercise and outlet. Having perhaps perfected her “method” in *To the Lighthouse* and since the development of new methods had in the past “brought fresh subjects,” as Woolf writes in her 1926 diary, she now returns to previous subjects that have “haunted” her: “some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it” (*D* 3: 117-18). Not wanting to “force this” theory of using form to obliterate time and the actual event, the idea gestates and reemerges three months later as Woolf is “toy[ing] vaguely with some thoughts of a flower whose petals fall; of time all telescoped
into one lucid channel through wh. my heroine was to pass at will”; here, as quoted previously, her sketch switches from a woman alone into a story of “two women”: “No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. […] My own lyric vein is to be satirised” (*D* 3: 131). “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” is, like Bach’s initial simple fugues in the *Art of Fugue*, the complete development of a single subject; *The Waves* will be a fugue of six voices, of nine episodes and interludes, working in simultaneity.15

The negotiation of narrative and lyric in order to understand what innovations had become conventional in prose is played out upon the scales of her short fiction. Nonetheless, to suggest that one should hear satire of Woolf’s own lyric vein as the main note of the story would be inaccurate. Rather, the arch use of a fugue-like pattern, which may have a satiric edge at the beginning of the story, ultimately becomes interwoven with the intensity of vision and immediacy at the story’s close. As Woolf’s diary entries and “The Narrow Bridge of Art” reveal, there is a dialogic progression in the complexity of the content Woolf wants to express and the formal innovation necessary to express it. As Kramer notes, “uncodified repetition is often a principle of stability” in Bach’s fugues,

15 I primarily explore the fugue-like writing of Woolf’s short story here since *The Waves* already has an established body of musical criticism—Alex Zwerdling, for example, describes the voices in *The Waves* as “like the voices of a fugue” (279). Nonetheless, a reading of the lyric narrative of *The Waves* based in musical form bears pursuing. In a diary entry of June 18, 1927, Woolf elaborates her “play-poem idea” (which she marks as “The Waves” in the margins at a subsequent reading): “I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late Beethoven sonatas” (139). This accompaniment to Woolf’s writing is significant since Beethoven’s late piano sonatas and string quartets are marked by their use of “fugal material in Classical sonata-style movements” (Sadie 274). Melba Cuddy-Keane, in “Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality” uses Brecht’s theories to assess the reader-listener’s response to the “Time Passes” chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, the affirmative “choric voices” of *The Waves*, and the disunity of *Between the Acts.*
and Woolf’s transposition of a musical pattern (the fugue) in prose, does create a satisfying stability or sense of structure in its use of repetition, as formalist critics have noted. Nonetheless, the content canvassed in counterpoint to that structure involves a narratological and psychological tour de force of potential variations not codified by conventional social and literary narrative structures. The result is indeed destabilizing for the progression of conventional, patriarchal narrative in this Sapphic story: “time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past” (D 3: 117-18).

2.4 Axifugal: Attending to the Dimensions of the Text

Critics have generally responded to Woolf’s story in writing with two readings: a formalist reading (James Hafley, Dean Baldwin) and a lesbian reading (Susan Clements, Janet Winston). Each response observes key elements of the text; however, separately, each closes off the “dual vision” Woolf’s writing creates. James Hafley’s reading of the story is an admiration of the author’s amusing “power to make patterns” (Woolf “Phases of Fiction” 82). Hafley explains the effect of reading the story as “the shock that always attends the contemplation of perfection or near-perfection” (139). Similarly, Dean Baldwin describes the pleasant concluding “shock” as the story’s joining “manner

---


17 Phelan uses this term to describe “a counterpart in focalization to what Mikhail Bakhtin has, in matters of voice, labeled double-voicing: dual vision or dual focalization (I avoid the term ‘double-voicing,’ since its negative connotations are likely to make readers do a double-take)” (118). “Dual vision” also evokes the double movement of lyric: “the double movement of lyric is toward fuller revelation of the speaker’s situation and perspective and, on the audience’s part, toward deeper understanding of and participation in what is revealed” (Phelan 163).
and message” in a “perfect whole” (55). In contrast, I suggest that this ambivalent word chosen to describe these readers’ experiences, and which replicates Fanny’s initial “shock” (103), invites investigation of the uneasy element of the shock, how the implied Woolf’s virtuoso construction and final twist guides the ideal reader to a recognition of the limits of such a perfect round. However, in contrast to Clements and Winston, I do not read the “shock” as Fanny’s sudden revelation of a lesbian identity. Such a reading neglects Woolf’s crafting of her heterodiegetic narrator, a narrator whose focalization and voice increasingly merges with those of the character Fanny in free indirect discourse.

Recent developments in narrative theory18 can help reconcile Woolf’s charge that writers must reject James’s formalism, “the series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged” (“Modern Fiction” 156) with her composition of such a patterned, symmetrical story as “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” In modeling a feminist-narratological approach, Susan Stanford Friedman uses Phelan’s notion of “narrative dynamics” to construct a “horizontal axis” (the space-time of the represented world and characters) and a “vertical axis” (the space-time of writer and reader) for reading a text (“Spatialization” 114-15). The vertical axis of narrative is dependent upon the horizontal (author-audience) axis and is determined by the interests and knowledge of the reader; one reader’s interest might delineate such vertical axes as “the literary, the historical, and the psychic” (115). A formalist criticism which analyzes only the horizontal axis, or an analysis that focuses on only one of the vertical axes, creates a monologic reading of the text—the very flatness Woolf’s layered text satirizes. The story’s design and emphasis on the necessary work of

18 Monika Fludernik’s “Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present” provides a useful overview of narrative theory’s integration of contextual, ideological, and feminist approaches since the 1970s.
the reader in re-composing the characters’ visions and comparing these to his or her own vision has a pedagogical function: it guides us to a more multi-dimensional mode of reading, one that perceives the complex dimensions and interrelations of the text’s axes.\textsuperscript{19}

Adding the literary and historical aspects on the vertical axis to the dynamics attended to when reading the text “involve[s] reading the horizontal narrative’s dialogues with other texts” (“Spatialization” 115). Adding the psychological aspects of Woolf as a modernist author and ardent “common reader” in relation to an audience challenged by modernist experiment and unconventional eroticism, thus registers an understanding of how the fugue-like form serves paradoxically to deconstruct notions of formalist art as well as the individual artist and captured subject. Woolf’s “structuralism”—as Denise Delorey has termed it (95)—then, is an effort to will prose to serve the artist in order to garner respect not for poetic structure in and of itself, but for its articulation of the polyphonies of life’s intensities, its reciprocal relationship with readers, and its potential to intensify the intervals of our lives.

Nonetheless, Woolf’s story certainly allows for a reading of the text as an apprenticeship in Jamesian craft. The chords that sound in the exposition and the coda, as Hafley notes, offer a reading as parlor performance virtuosity, and the nested episodes evoke the image at the conclusion of Woolf’s “Kew Gardens” of “a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another” (36). Dorrit Cohn has described Henry James’s work as frequently employing “Chinese box effects,” as his

\textsuperscript{19} Here, “axis,” an axifugal term, may be thought of as the imaginary pole around which revolves a globe or galaxy or social system, the axis joining two wheels or two magnets, the straight line from the eye to the object of sight or the axis of incidence or refraction, etc.
narrated monologues are “nested within the narrated memory” (130). Although Woolf’s fugue-like form suggests embedded boxes turning with the precision of parts of a music box, her insistence on ambiguity on the level of form as well as content distinguishes the complex permeability of her text from the “wrought steel” of James’s work. For both authors, narrated monologue is the medium of choice “for revealing a fictional mind suspended in an instant present, between a remembered past and an anticipated future” (Cohn 126). However, since Woolf blurs the distinctions of memory, fantasy, and the character’s present surroundings in the figural mind, and more importantly, the distinctions between the narrator and the character, she demands an active reader rather than the passive reader dictated by James’s construction in which his presence becomes an “obstacle” (“Phases of Fiction” 82).

The nested episodes of Woolf’s text represent the oscillation of a figure’s consciousness and emotions through variations of narrative choice—quoted monologue, psycho-narration, and narrated monologue (Cohn 136). Woolf’s text employs such narrative techniques not for the verbal virtuosity she grants is James’s greatness but to draw attention to the dynamic ambiguity inherent in the reciprocal process of reading (whether the text is a fugue, a piano teacher, or a short story). Whereas the highly wrought pattern of James’s construction fails by insisting on attention to the showman, Woolf’s double-voiced pattern functions as an invitation to the reader to use the pattern as a net to capture moments of intensity, vision, emotion—that is, moments of being.

According to Woolf, “[t]he longer the novelist pores over the analysis, the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes. And it is this double vision,” that James lacks, that is characteristic of Proust and makes his works “so spherical, so
comprehensive” and yet “rivets [the] eyes” on characters (“Phases of Fiction” 97). For such authors who “set themselves to follow feelings and thoughts, there is always an overflow of emotion from the author” that serves as a backdrop, as if “characters of such subtlety and complexity could be treated only when the rest of the book is a deep reservoir of thought and emotion” (88). Such characters may be “unformulated” while nonetheless “exist[ing]” since they are steeped in “a world made of the same stuff as they are” (88). “Thus, though the author himself is not present […] The effect of this brooding and analysing mind is always to produce an atmosphere of doubt, of questioning, of pain, perhaps of despair” in the reader (88-9). The author’s presence weaves a residue of personal emotion that is the necessary pattern for the reader to capture the intensity of the moment narrated and to experience the complex “feelings and thoughts” of a character beyond the formulaic. The author’s self-erasure through aesthetic refinement allows us to draw close to the character by creating a sense of lyric timelessness that suspends readerly judgment. Woolf’s delicate balance of foregrounding and withdrawing the presence of an implied author—we both are immersed in Fanny’s imaginative productions and aware of the artistry of Woolf’s lyric portrayal of those productions—produces a dual vision. The formalist mechanics of the “vast nest of Chinese boxes” in Woolf’s short fiction spin within an envelope of contingent, chaotic life, “on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air” (“Kew Gardens” 36).

In Woolf’s story, the characteristics of the lyric dominate the narrative, particularly in the reader’s suspension of judgment. Although Fanny is not a character narrator, Phelan’s description of the author-audience relationship of such narration in
lyric narrative is apt: “the implied author invites the authorial audience to enter sympathetically into the character narrator’s perspective but does not ask us to render an ethical judgment of that perspective or of the character narrator” (Phelan 158). Although we are not asked to judge Fanny or even Julia according to an established ethic, “we still engage ethically with the text, but focus not on the ethics of the character’s actions but on the underlying value structure of the lyric narrative” (Phelan 159). The self-reflexive move of the lyric narrative not only draws readers into an alternative ethic, but also casts the reader back to reflect on his or her own underlying values.

The expansion of the range of narrated monologue techniques in fiction, which Dorrit Cohn maps as authorial (distant and ironic tonality) and figural (empathetic and consonant tonality), creates a virtual “keyboard of consciousness” which authors such as Woolf have played not merely for “virtuoso performances” but in order to refashion the “relation between technique and narrative situation” to create a more well-tempered scale for pursuing the something that forever escapes (138). Provokingly, during the same period that Woolf focused on her experiments of achieving poetic effects in prose, the art critic Roger Fry, her friend and contemporary, was working on a translation of the prose poems of Mallarmé. Charles Mauron (who translated “Time Passes” for publication in France in 1926) 20 writes in the introduction of the translation, that Fry discovered in

---

20 James M. Haule discovered the typescript Woolf submitted for the French publication (before the publication of To the Lighthouse) and discusses the many subsequent revisions as a response to Roger Fry’s critique. In Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy, Jane Marcus argues that publishing a French version of “Time Passes” in 1926 “was an attempt to gain the attention of French women writers and readers, […] to place herself as a writer in relation to the powerful community of women artists in Paris in the twenties,” women that Marcus describes as recreating “Sappho’s island community” (5).
working on the translation that the key to these prose poems is the “discovery of ‘something else’,” which the psychological apparatus behind the works conveys, and makes up the “modulations between” the extremes of “reality” and that “something else” that obsesses the poet (38). Mauron continues, noting Roger Fry’s conditions for the creation of “pure art,” the first of which:

is the establishment of a keyboard. There can be no architecture without fixed points and subtle methods of passing form one to another: without the modal system, no Gregorian music: without the ‘tempered’ keyboard, no Bach: without depth and scale of luminous values, no true painting. And the great creators are those who do not merely perform and construct, but in the first place cast their instrument to suit the kind of performance which is proper for them. (38-9)

Woolf’s aim in pushing the boundaries of fiction is to develop fiction as “the instrument best fitted to the complexity and difficulty of modern life,” an instrument that can achieve and surpass the effects of other arts (“Phases of Fiction” 102). “Phases of Fiction” revels in the open field that prose offers for her poetic aim, but the pattern she traces also delineates the “danger” that the novelist must negotiate: the power of the author in “style, arrangement, construction” that shapes the novel into an universal form is fundamentally at odds with the power of the novel “to bring us into close touch with life” (101). The latter is essential to Woolf who recognized that in establishing the conditions to create “pure” or “great” art, the artist must also attend to the conditions audiences demand if they are to take up their creative role. Since these “two powers,” the power of pure poetic art to “put us at a distance” and the power of prosodic reality “to bring us into close touch with life,” “fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must […] balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other” (101). The move from opposition to this productive balance is the synthetic tension of
Woolf’s short story, as well as the dialectical vision informing all of her lyric narrative writing. The stipulation “most” complete (rather than, simply, complete) suggests the necessary residue, the emotional surplus that the implied author offers over to the ideal reader who is finally free of the author’s tutelage.

In the three-year period when Woolf first developed the idea for “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and its publication, she struggled with her desire for perfect aesthetic form and her recognition of its solipsism, struggled with her desire for readers’ praise and sympathy and her distaste for the limiting conventions that could secure an audience easily, and struggled with her place as an inheritor of precursors such as Henry James and Walter Pater and her jealousy of certain contemporaries. If Woolf, like her character Julia Craye, desired to possess beauty as an artist and realized that the forms and readerly expectations she had inherited were inadequate for grasping beauty—for her, the transient moments of being in life—then she also realized that possession ultimately entailed harmonizing her readers’ desires with her own, convincing them (and herself) that shattering the glass of convention (the Victorian looking-glasses and hothouses, the glass that separates the Crayes from the world) was desirable and that relinquishing the pursuit of the “perfect whole” was a triumph.

The dialectics of this struggle are represented in the story’s mimetic and synthetic narrative dimensions. The two meta-fictional metaphors that form nodal points throughout Woolf’s writing characteristically develop contrapuntally in this story and are representative of Woolf’s use of a dialectic of metaphors to articulate and explore a philosophical and epistemological vision. In her diary, Woolf wrote on January 4, 1929, “Now is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This
has gone on for ever: will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on” (D 3: 218). Woolf scholars have aptly used the shorthand “granite and rainbow” (coined by Woolf in 1927) to denote this dualism of life being both solid and shifting. Woolf’s dialectic becomes a central theme after *To the Lighthouse*, in which a pattern (which she associates with “Reality” in her diary) is the counterpoint of flux. Woolf’s point in the many iterations of this dialectic in her work is not resolution but an exposure and exploration of their tension and interrelation: the “moment” Woolf stands upon.

---

21 Woolf writes in “The New Biography” (1927): “And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one […]” (GR 149).

22 For “reality” in Woolf’s diaries, see entries for September 30, 1926, and September 10, 1928, as well as *A Sketch of the Past*: what I call ‘reality’: a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows—once one takes the pen & writes? How difficult not to go making ‘reality’ this & that, whereas it is one thing. (D 3:196) Ann Banfield persuasively reads Woolf’s “granite and rainbow” as a division of the external world into existence and being: “granite represents not a sensation but a support, what gives shape and rigidity” and rainbow represents “the secondary qualities […] the momentariness of sense data” (149, 150). Banfield aligns the latter with Woolf’s “cotton wool” which “is a metaphor for sensation” (150). Momentariness, however, is not the same as what I call the lyric moment, the moment upon which Woolf stands. The lyric moment is achieved in the productive tension of the two, as indeed Banfield suggests: “Structuring the formless granite gives permanence to the evanescent, transfixes an arrow in time’s flight, anchors color in weight” (151). In *To the Lighthouse*, the granite is the skull, the rainbow Mrs. Ramsay’s shawl; they mark “the uneasy union of the two principles” (Banfield 151). Another striking example of Woolf’s theory of granite and rainbow as the necessary dialectic for capturing the intensity of experience is found in Lily Briscoe’s reflections on her method of painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Having been immersed in a memory of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily thinks of her picture’s “problem of space”: “Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron” (171).
Given the complexity of this tension and the prolixity of Woolf’s metaphors, it may be useful to pause here and delineate the two granite and rainbow groups of images in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” that signal Woolf’s dialectical vision. Fabric (curtain, fugue pattern, Julia’s cloak) and crystallized point (flower, transparency, the moment of possession) are the two meta-fictional metaphors of the story. Like Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical image,” they are composed not as an irreducible binary, not as an opposition to transcend, but in a productive tension. These image-plots are embedded in a web of discourses, modes of “seeing” (biographical, literary, historical, feminist, and so on) that the story invites the reader to examine as interconnected and open to manipulation. In “Phases of Fiction,” Woolf explains that the “complete” work of fiction is a “union of the thinker and the poet,” a “flight of imagery” and then a twist that gives the reader “a different view of the same object in terms of metaphor” (85). In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Woolf’s lyrical image-plots are not lyric for lyric’s sake, but embedded in a young woman’s engagement with a polyphony of social discourses. The story is an inner (Chinese) box suggesting the complexity of the whole of Woolf’s development as a writer; the story’s power and beauty are more fully registered with attention to the complexity of the envelope of voices, images, and influences that surround it.

2.5 Sappho’s Lyrics: “having come from heaven wrapped in a purple cloak” (54)

The conclusion of Woolf’s story “Kew Gardens,” alluded to above, intimates the need to attend to the complexity of the moment; Woolf has drawn her readers down into the intensity of a moment of deep, silent “contentment” (one evocative of her notion of
“reality”) but finally asserts that “[w]ordless voices” are not “breaking the silence” (35-6). Rather, “there was no silence,” and the story ends with the image of the “vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly” within an envelope of the city and the evanescent flowers and voices of the gardens (35-6). The complex interrelation and indeterminacy portrayed in this early story, Woolf’s launch into lyric experimentation, provides a cue for reading “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” which similarly concludes with a dialectical tension and twist, a “shock.”

This “shock” has largely been interpreted as a drama of “breaking the silence”; such readings tend to read one strand on the narrative vertical axis of Woolf’s suggestive story, its proclaimed “Sapphism.”23 Unfortunately, such a “seductive thought” (“Slater’s” 105) which draws the reader into a conspiracy with the elusive author, can produce a monologic reading that restricts the scope of the text’s rhetorical aim. In her essay “The Point of ‘Slater’s Pins’: Misrecognition and the Narrative Closet,” Susan Clements offers a useful discussion of misrecognition and sexual identity in narrative choice. However, Clements’s swift pinning of Fanny as the narrator and as a narrator who “continually shies away” from “perceiving her lesbian orientation” is problematic (17, 16). Woolf’s story does represent the limits of narrative conventions in the context of “established heterosexual traditions” (Clements 16) and the immense difficulty of the

23 Woolf refers to the story three times in her letters: to Vita Sackville-West around July 8, 1927, “I’ve just written, or re-written, a nice little story about Sapphism, for the Americans” (L 3:397); to Vita on October 13, 1927, “Sixty pounds just received from America for my little Sapphist story of which the editor has not seen the point, though he’s been looking for it in the Adirondacks” (L 3:431); to a Miss Harper on September 14, 1928 who had sent a translation into French that would be published in Paris in 1929, a note that interestingly follows a letter to Vita relating how Woolf’s signing of a published letter protesting the banning of *The Well of Loneliness* has lead her to seem “the mouthpiece of Sapphism, writ[ing] letters from the Reform Club” (L 3:530).
writer, as a subject and a writer, in realizing and moving beyond the “design that has been traced upon our minds which reading brings to light” (“Phases of Fiction” 56). However, that critique is the starting point already reached in Woolf’s previous work, particularly *The Voyage Out, Night and Day, and To the Lighthouse*; here, Woolf is trying out alternative narratives and practicing perceptual variations that, to paraphrase Rachel Blau DuPlessis, extend beyond that ending.

Janet Winston’s “Reading Influences: Homoreoticism and Mentoring in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Carnation’ and Virginia Woolf’s ‘Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points’,” provides a more open reading of the text and the importance of the multidimensional elements of an author’s invitation. However, like Clements, Winston interprets Fanny’s reading as “heterocentric” and clouded by “patriarchal notions of reality” which obscure “an awareness of Julia’s lesbianism” (69). Winston quotes the invented “heterosexual seduction scenario in which a supposedly staid and frigid Julia rebuffs a male suitor” as evidence (69). Both readings ignore the sympathy and identification Fanny, as an embedded narrator composing scenes of Julia’s life, evidences toward her protagonist and not the pathetic Mr. Sherman. Fanny contrasts his insensitive frustration, as he splashes his oars at his wasted time and bruised ego, with the profundity of “graceful” Julia’s revelation as she steers them clear at the “critical moment” (107-08). Nonetheless, Winston concludes that Fanny’s composition indicates that she “reads Julia’s spinsterhood as a pitiful ‘problem’” and the scene “represents Julia’s failure to respond appropriately to the man’s desire to propose marriage” (69-70). Winston’s aim is to read the story’s progression as a dynamic, linear narrative rather than lyric’s vertical blossoming. She argues that it is only at the conclusion that Fanny’s perspective on “her
teacher’s inability to connect physically and passionately with another person” changes (70). In contrast, I would argue that this is the climax in a series of Fanny’s compositions of Julia’s triumph.

Both Clements and Winston translate Fanny’s last name, Wilmot, as “Will not” in order to emphasize her resistance to seeing Julia’s and/or her own lesbianism. However, the name could also suggest the will of words; such a translation makes room for a reading of Fanny as a willing apprentice, a perceiving and desiring subject that wills into being the vision Julia has provided her the form (the model of the fugue, the model of her life choices) to possess. By recognizing Woolf’s move from a narrative toward a lyric progression in the story, we see that the critical moment is not a change in Fanny’s mis-recognizing vision that sees Julia as a failure until the conclusion. Indeed, Fanny reveals from her first composition of Miss Craye that “she is infatuated with her” (Hussey 164). Rather, the critical moment may be “hopelessly undramatic” (D 3: 106). However, in inviting the reader to see through Fanny’s eyes impartially, as the lyric mode in narrative leads the reader to suspend judgment of a character, Woolf’s story invites the reader to participate in the creation of a moment of being that possesses beauty in crystallizing a moment of dual vision.

In pinning Fanny’s, Julia Craye’s, and Phoebe Kingston’s lesbianism, we risk missing the finer points of Woolf’s broader goal of exploring human interactions not

24 Perhaps not coincidentally given the prominence of the fallen flower, Anne Herrmann’s brief description of the story twice misprints her name as “Fanny Wilt” (76).

25 Herrmann concludes, “Sapphism is suggested not be imagining a same-sex object choice but a moment of ‘ecstasy,’ both aesthetic and erotic, shared by two women obliquely inscribed in, but ultimately written out of, recorded history” (77).
codified by established subject positions (pinned as proper or perverse by dominant discourse). The thread of “misrecognition” and a lesbian subtext should be understood in its intersection with Woolf’s manipulation of narrative form to resist reductive readings. Her story is all the more subversive for taking the mutual attraction of Fanny and Julia as a priori. Indeed, such a reading better attends to the story’s “Sapphism” than a reading of misrecognition. As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued, Woolf’s use of lyric disrupts “narrative patterns that inscribe the social order,” authority, and desire (“Lyric Subversion” 164). Friedman aptly characterizes the lyric moment in Woolf’s work as a move “outside of time” that involves the bonding of two subjects, often a “(re)union with the mother,” which then “initiates (re)birth in-time, in narrative” (“Lyric Subversion” 178). This movement back and forth (between lyric vision and narrative progression) is the method Woolf develops for exploring the complexity of subjectivity. I do not, however, suggest that in heeding the lyric dimensions of the story that Woolf’s text is revealed as an untroubled celebration of female intimacy and unlimited creative vision thus opening the way to Fanny’s “true” self. Phelan’s diagnosis of the function of lyric in The Waves applies to Woolf’s earlier story: Woolf’s characters’ visions and the impersonality of the narrator’s voice emphasizes “a double vision: the lyric utterances collectively insist on the intensity and value of life” while “implicitly question[ing] the significance of those lyric moments” (Narrative as Rhetoric 42).

The story’s “Sapphism” is subversive not only in its a priori rejection of patriarchal narratives, but also in its subtle complexity that makes it more than simply a “nice little story about Sapphism” (L 3: 397). While Fanny’s vision of her mentor and her relationship to her mentor is ultimately an affirmative vision of an alternative to
patriarchal spaces, relations, and narratives, it also raises provocative questions about epistemology and subjectivity. Fanny, engaged in “making up” Julia Craye, portrays one of Woolf’s favorite pastimes—these are the words she uses most often in describing her relationship to Vita Sackville-West. Woolf’s creativity fed upon and reveled in the romance of her own compositional power; however, Woolf also possessed the deconstructing vision that exposed her illusions as illusions and thus led to a questioning of the knowability of others. Having completed *Orlando*, Woolf wrote to Sackville-West, “I’ve lived in you all these months—coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? Have I made you up?”; and several weeks later, she writes with a desire to travel through France together, “unless you are, as I think all my friends are, a myth, something I dreamt” (*L 3*: 474, 479). As in her relationship with Sackville-West, which has also suffered reductive readings, Woolf’s portrayal of Fanny’s relationship to Julia explores her increasing preoccupation of the relationship of “reality” (associated with “the moment whole; whatever it includes […] thought; sensation; the voice of the sea”) and “unreality” (the “appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional”) (*D 3*: 209). Vita was both a reader of and a muse for Woolf, and the complex dynamics of that relationship is found in Julia’s relationship to Fanny, and extends to the readers of the story and its implied author.

In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” the progression of the narrative is driven less by the reader’s desire to see Fanny finally realize that she feels erotic love for Miss Craye, than by the reader’s desire to see Fanny meet Miss Craye’s embrace by their mutual recognition of their sympathetic, artistic vision of each other. Furthermore, this relationship is the medium through which the implied Woolf is waiting for the implied
reader’s vision to expand and thus rise to embrace the new possibilities Woolf opens in her experimental work. Given this emphasis on reciprocity, Clements’s assertion that “Miss Craye attempts in vain to pass her wisdom on to Fanny” who “remains blinded by the language and traditions of her culture” (22) suggests a failure in the implied Woolf’s aim. Woolf’s “point” seems, in contrast to Clements’s analysis, the construction of a love lyric about two women seeing through and moving past the glass enclosures of “the language and traditions” of their culture, that ends with the success of both women. Miss Craye succeeds as a mentor in providing a medium to broaden Fanny’s vision, which already desires to embrace alternatives, and Fanny succeeds as an apprentice artist and would-be lover in mastering the play of vision and desire of the other that Julia models.

Further support for this reading of narrative progression is found in Fanny’s frequent return to the similarity of the visions of Julia and her brother Julius. It is Fanny’s recognition of the slight difference between the siblings’ visions which accents the story’s opening and closing gestures. In Fanny’s portraiture, both Julia and Julius see in a young person (Julius watches a young Polly Kingston through a window) a representation of their desire to seize and capture transient beauty, which the “kind of spell that was the glassy surface” of traditional narrative has kept them from capturing (105). The siblings’ visions are indistinguishable until Fanny differentiates Julia from her “queer” brother Julius in Julia’s desire to “break the spell” that had sealed her brother behind the cool glass of the house: “Miss Craye wanted to break [the glassy surface] by showing, when she had played Bach beautifully as a reward to a favourite pupil (Fanny Wilmot knew that she was Miss Craye’s favourite pupil), that she, too, knew, like other people, about pins. Slater’s pins had no points” (105).
Since this is ultimately Fanny’s reading and rendering of Miss Craye’s artistic vision, this scene reveals Fanny’s desire for Miss Craye to break the “glassy surface” that had separated her brother from the world. Fanny makes Miss Craye an active hero who can achieve both aesthetic and personal triumph by possessing beauty figured as her self (Fanny), in reaching through the window dividing inner and outer worlds to touch or possess her through such commonplaces as “Slater’s pins have no points” (105). Fanny simultaneously makes Julia accessible and desiring in making a statement that affirms the theme’s expository question. Her love for Miss Craye grows with Fanny’s recognition that not only does Miss Craye refuse a normative heterosexual narrative in threading the “necklace of memorable days” of her life by instead living by her own desires (109), but also with her belief that Miss Craye might desire the beauty she herself possesses and is thus willing to shatter her “cool glassy world” (103). On the horizontal axis of narrative progression, the reader comes to recognize the sympathy of desires in Fanny’s reading of Julia’s vision as attempting to pin down and possess beauty, a vision which, unlike Julius’s, might shatter the narratives that create glass enclosures. On the vertical axis, the reader comes closer to recognizing Woolf’s desire for a sympathetic audience that will desire her vision, that is, a vision of shattering the perfect whole of conventional novelistic form in order to embrace the fugacious nature of subjectivity.

The subversive complexity of the story is further revealed in exploring another of its vertical axes, the story’s invocation of Walter Pater and Woolf’s drawing on her experiences as a student of Clara Pater. Julius Craye’s entrapment within the house, his aesthetic alienation, recalls the backlash against the publication of The Renaissance that alienated Walter Pater from Oxford and had “driven him to London with his sister in the
summer of 1885” (Meisel 32). Virginia Woolf began Greek and Latin lessons with Clara Pater in 1898, at the home she kept in Kensington with her sister and brother until 1893 when they returned to Oxford where both she and her brother taught. Walter Pater, not a dead famous archaeologist but an infamous critic and artist in the palimpsestic nature of language, would die a year later. Particularly striking in comparing the development of Woolf’s work to Pater’s is her revision of the meta-fictional metaphors of fabric and transparency. As Meisel argues, Walter Pater’s work came to stand for the love for aesthetics that dare not speak its name; aestheticism and the notion of a homosexual “taint” had become wedded in Oxford, and the Bloomsbury circle tended to keep silent their inheritances of Pater’s work.

Although Meisel’s interest in comparing Woolf and Pater is to finally see Woolf as vampirically feeding upon Pater and then burying the body, I argue that Woolf used Pater as she did James, Proust, and Sterne—as nodal points to mark her own departure and to chart a progression for best negotiating “The Narrow Bridge of Art” herself. For each artist she learned what succeeded, discovered what limits they had reached, and aspired to push fiction farther. Woolf begins “Modern Fiction,” “Phases of Fiction,” and “The Art of Fiction” by conceiving the history of the novel as a spiral, and she concludes each with a challenge for movement in a new direction. Her short fiction tracks that spiral, or “helix,” progression (Marcus 40).26 T. S. Eliot wrote of Woolf’s first collection of short stories, Monday or Tuesday:

the secret charm of Mrs. Woolf’s shorter pieces is the immense disparity between the object and the train of feeling which it has set in motion. Mrs. Woolf gives

---

26 Alex Zwerdling and Jane Marcus have both argued that Woolf’s aesthetic value of art should be understood in a binary system with her concern for the social and political value of art.
you the minutest datum, and leads you on to explore, quite consciously, the sequence of images and feelings which float away from it. The result is something which makes Walter Pater appear an unsophisticated rationalist, and the writing is often remarkable. The book is one of the most curious and interesting examples of a process of dissociation which in that direction it would seem, cannot be exceeded. (“London Letter” 216-17)

Eliot’s somewhat backhanded praise reflects his concept of the “objective correlative,” the impersonal or unselfconsciousness which derives from the perfect “synthesis of meaning and being, idea and form,” and which Woolf saw as “characteristic of Greek literature” (Minow-Pinkney 34). While Woolf admired and mastered Pater’s impressionist criticism, she consciously sought to avoid his stylistic limitations (a propensity to paralyze his subject) and his social limitations (the homophobia that restricted Pater as well as the disappointing misogyny of many of the male homosexuals in Oxford and Cambridge that restricted women writers).

Woolf’s use of the term “Sapphic” to describe the story should not be read as merely a polite term to mask “lesbian.” Instead, the term points to Woolf’s contribution to a broader, feminist community at a pivotal point for women writers. Jane Marcus, who historicizes A Room of One’s Own by reading it in the context of the trial of Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, uses the term “sapphistry” to describe Woolf’s unique narrative strategy (Languages of Patriarchy 163). To Marcus, Woolf’s “sapphistry” is a performance of the “woman writer seduc[ing] the woman reader” (169). Significantly, given the story’s allusion to one of Bach’s fugues, sapphistry “requires complete mastery of the structure of classical rhetoric to subvert powerlessness” (Marcus 169). Marcus’s reading of Woolf’s Sapphic rhetorical strategy in A Room of One’s Own is applicable to “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”: one of Woolf’s purposes is “the recruitment and
enlistment of a new generation of women in the cause for feminist scholarship” (176). I do not restrict Woolf’s rhetorical invitation to one sex, but agree that Woolf’s work attempts to engender a community of reader-writers who engage in the kind of critiques feminism has made possible. “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” not only portrays such a community in microcosm, but is set in opposition both to heterosexual patriarchal narratives (the courtship scene of Mr. Sherman) and to homosexual patriarchal narratives (Julius Craye, the “famous” archeologist).

Woolf’s critique of patriarchy extended to the homosexual men that she had hoped would be allies in her outsider feminism. In her diary, Woolf expresses frustration during the 1920s towards the predominance of male homosexuality in dictating the vanguard of Cambridge and Bloomsbury iconoclasm. Indeed, Woolf’s objection is the lack of iconoclasm in male homosexuals of Cambridge and Bloomsbury. Marcus writes,

The patriarchs often were products of the same educational system at Eton and Cambridge, where ‘the Greek view of life’ was glorified by the most elite secret societies like the Apostles. The sexual relations between men in school appear to have been hierarchical power relations between the strong and the weak and thus reinforcements of patriarchal structures. It does not appear that the homosexuality of these upper-class men threatened the patriarchal family. (177)

Woolf does not critique male homosexuality in and of itself, but her contemporaries’ willingness to participate in the continuation of a male-centered system of privilege. In an April 1925 entry, Woolf writes of her “anti-bugger revolution” after a visit with Lytton Strachey: “The pale star of the Bugger has been in the ascendant too long” (D 3: 10). This hyperbole of an anti-bugger campaign seems homophobic until one considers that Woolf is fighting for the illumination of “Chloe and Olivia” against not only a hetero-centric society but also, as she discovered, a male homosexual society that was as
often misogynist. In 1928, Woolf records an emotional (and drunken) conversation with E.M. Forster about “sodomy, & sapphism” prompted by “Radclyffe Hall & her meritorious dull book”; “He said he thought Sapphism disgusting: partly from convention, partly because he disliked that women should be independent of men” (D 3: 193). While Woolf is careful not to risk “disgusting” her audience with a scene of lesbian love-making, “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” is an important example of Woolf’s narrative “sapphistries” in portraying women independent of men. It is also a key text in reading the narrative experiments of women artists in the late 1920s. Woolf’s relationship with mentors Jane Harrison and Clara Pater, her on-going interest in Greek, and her use of images from Sappho’s lyrics locate the story in the context of an anti-patriarchal, “anti-bugger revolution” perceived by both the literary elite and culture at large as a real threat in the 1920s.

Between 1909 and 1925, as Eileen Gregory writes, a “revolution in scholarship of Sappho” saw the “number of extant lines of Sappho’s poems more than double” (148). Gregory notes the “distinctiveness of Sappho’s lyric fiction” from her male contemporaries; “the fragments of Sappho imply a fiction of female relations in the thiasos that has a fullness in itself, apart from the male,” a fullness symbolized in the image of a flower (156-7). Woolf’s conclusion in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” the “fullness” of the moment of pinning the flower, is aptly described by Thomas McEvilley’s analysis of the flower image in Sappho’s works: the flower represents “that brief moment when the beautiful shines out brilliantly and assumes, for all its

27 Thiasos describes a female community, such as an attendant group of followers of Artemis; although Sappho does not use the term, scholars have used thiasos to describe Sappho’s enclave, identifying the group’s purpose with the education of young women.
perishability, the stature of an eternal condition in the spirit if not in the body” (269). Woolf’s use of the image of the flower takes up a Sapphic tradition: the “divine epiphany” in Sappho is figured in “the ephemeral and ordinary gestures of young women” (Gregory 157). Likewise, the modernist epiphany emerges from the dialectic of the ephemeral moment and an eternal structure to point toward a “something that forever escapes.” For feminist-socialist writers such as Woolf, the epiphanic moment of being is glimpsed as possible through the interstices of patriarchal structures and is figured elliptically in such simple gestures as a pinned flower. McEvilley describes a typical fragment of Sappho, of girls “plaiting garlands for a rite that is never explained,” in which the poet’s intention is to emphasize the beauty of their gestures and “a certain unspecific sadness which this beauty evokes” (158). McEvilley reads this rite as the poetic process itself: “the rite in which the flowerlike beauty of girls is celebrated in an inner garden where such perishable stuff is transmuted into those timeless flowers, poems” (256). In Sappho’s fragments, Gregory writes, “the young girl, seen through the eyes of poet or lover, is for a moment the goddess” and becomes for the reader the embodiment of poetic vision (157). The “shock” in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” I would argue, is not the pinning of a character’s lesbian identity, but the fullness of the moment of the thiasos that readers are seduced to participate in—which its beauty, its affirmation of alternative modes of living, and its poetry in attempting to make permanent the evanescent moment.
2.6 Fugues in Words: Space, Time, Sexuality and Textuality in the Late Twenties

The “sapphistry” of Woolf’s text is twofold, mimetic (Julia and Fanny’s alternative women’s sphere) and synthetic (Woolf’s rhetorical seduction and narrative experimentation). In order to show the significance of what may seem a slight work in Woolf’s and modernism’s oeuvres, I depart briefly here from my reading of the story’s development of these two narrative dimensions. The helix-shaped development of experimentation—the intertwining of aesthetic movements and socio-political developments—can perhaps explain two similar turns Woolf’s contemporaries take during this period: first, in the synthetic narrative dimension, a spate of “fugue writing” took place in the twenties, and second, in the mimetic or thematic narrative dimension, a surge in the depiction of lesbian characters and Sapphic contexts that culminated in 1928 in the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*.28 These two simultaneous booms are related, I argue, to the modernist turn toward self-reflexive writing and the feminist strategic turn toward lyric narrative.

André Gide’s 1926 *The Counterfeiters*, in its privileging of portraiture, self-reflexivity, and narrative play over plot, marks an important modernist turn in the novel.29

---

28 Elaine Marks’s essay “Lesbian Intertextuality” in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Penelope’s Web*, and Anne Herrmann’s *Queering the Moderns* are useful texts for contextualizing lesbian fiction in the twenties.

29 In “The Introverted Novel,” John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury argue that Gide’s novel is the type of modernist novel that explores the “poverty of reality and the powers of art”; *The Counterfeiters* “is an artificial game with Chinese boxes […] but Gide is a serious and sincere mind” (409). For Fletcher and Bradbury, the novel’s conclusion suggests that “literature is a tidying up after life’s chaotic bungling” (Fletcher and Bradbury 409-10). While I agree with their useful assessment of this branch of modernism (traceable from Proust) as one in which “Art is thus the central illumination; it alone can give pattern or form which in turn makes significance out of what would otherwise be a contingent sequence” (402), I would add a caveat to their description of Woolf’s work in this line. They write that Woolf’s art is “an exploration both of
In the chapter “Edouard Explains His Theory of the Novel,” Gide’s Edouard is shown discussing the difficulties of the subject of his next novel with characters Bernard, Laura, and Mme. Sophroniska. In pursuing “psychological truth” as a novelist, Edouard must be particular, but this imperative conflicts with art’s need to be “general” (172). A precursor to Woolf’s theory of the novel in *A Room of One’s Own*, that one must “think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment” (43), Edouard elaborates, “What I want is to represent reality on the one hand, and on the other that effort to stylize it into art of which I have just been speaking” (Gide 173). When Laura warns him that readers will “die of boredom,” Edouard (displaying Gide’s love of self-reflexivity of which Edouard has just been speaking) argues, “Not at all. In order to arrive at this effect—do you follow me?—I invent the character of a novelist, whom I make my central figure; and the subject of the book, if you must have one, is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it” (173). Edouard is taken by his subject, that reading “the story of the work—its gestation” is indeed more interesting than the work itself (as genetic critics would agree), and admits he is more interested in ideas than men (175). Edouard continues developing his idea of the novel, “What I should like to do is something like the art of fugue writing. And I can’t see why what was possible in

the aesthetics of consciousness and the aesthetics of art, pursued simultaneously and without any real sense of artistic crisis—rather with a kind of joyous artistic freedom,” and this is indeed a description that fits “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” but neglects the very real crises Woolf confronts after the popular success of *Orlando* and her writing of *The Waves* as Sean Latham has discussed in ‘Am I a Snob?: Modernism and the Novel’. Walter Benjamin, in his 1930 “Crisis of the Novel,” usefully discusses Gide’s work as one of two extremes in the modernist novel; Woolf’s work does not lie at this extreme.
music should be impossible in literature” (175; emphasis added). Sophroniska “rejoined that music is a mathematical art” and Bach,

by banishing all pathos and all humanity, had achieved an abstract chef d’oeuvre of boredom, a kind of astronomical temple only to the few rare initiated. Edouard at once protested that, for his part, he thought the temple admirable, and considered it the apex and crowning point of all Bach’s career. “After which,” added Laura, “people were cured of the fugue for a long time to come. Human emotion, when it could no longer inhabit it, sought a dwelling place elsewhere.” (175-6)

To himself, Edouard acknowledges the transformational sway that such writing has for him: his thoughts, if allowed to tumble into abstractions, are there as “comfortable as a fish in water” and “the place of characters” lost (176; emphasis added). Sophroniska counters Edouard’s ideal art of fugue writing with the charge of its lack of humanity (for its “mathematical” “astronomical temple” to aestheticism), in part, out of her need for an underlying mysticism: “without mysticism nothing great, nothing fine can be accomplished in this world” (179).

Although Gide’s novel itself does not pursue “the art of fugue writing,” it does reflect contemporary modernist experiments and critiques of those experiments, and does itself attempt to achieve the balance that Edouard’s theory maps. The critiques of Edouard’s hypothetical fugue writing given by Laura and Sophroniska—notably two women—are worth pursuing. Their complaints are of an aesthetic that is sealed off; Gide implicitly questions Edouard’s desire to seal art off from the opening out of mysticism (indeed, in the novel Bernard wrestles with an angel) as well as Edouard’s lack of care for the audience outside of the “astronomical temple.”

---

30 Ralph Freedman compares The Counterfeiters and The Waves as “lyrical fiction”: they are examples of the “more usual variation […] the pattern of soliloquists” (15). “The novel’s form is
Gide’s Edouard is preceded by James Joyce in deliberately attempting an “art of fugue writing,” and Joyce’s experience both supports and refutes Laura’s assertion that once the temple reached its apex, “people were cured of the fugue for a long time to come.” In 1919, Joyce explained that he had just finished the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses*: “I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music. It is a fugue with all musical notations,” but in writing it he felt he could no longer listen to music, since “I see though all the tricks and can’t enjoy it any more” (Ellmann 459). Similarly, in a letter to Harriet Weaver he expressed (perhaps disingenuously) the sacrifice the art of fugue writing entailed: “each successive episode dealing with some province of artistic culture (rhetoric or music or dialectic), leaves behind it a burnt up field. Since I wrote the *Sirens*, I find it impossible to listen to music of any kind” (Ellmann 461). It seems that for Joyce the art of fugue writing did result in a need to seek “a dwelling place elsewhere”; nonetheless, “Sirens” has since become a particularly fecund dwelling place for Joyce critics. Moreover, the profound pathos of the episode, particularly in the depiction of Leopold Bloom and even the peripheral characters Mina Kennedy and Lydia Douce, refutes Laura’s and Sophroniska’s argument that such attention to form is inevitably anti-humanistic.

Although Joyce himself may have been “cured” for a time of the art of fugue writing, Gide’s contemporaries were not. In addition to Joyce and Woolf, other prominent writers who developed a fugue-like writing in the twenties include Gertrude Stein (*The Making of Americans*, 1925; *Composition as Explanation*, published by the made up of a pattern of these sequences which acts both through the cumulative motion of the ‘lyrical process’ and through several juxtaposed levels of awareness” (Freedman 15).
Hogarth Press 1926; and *How to Write*, 1931), Osbert Sitwell (*Triple Fugue*, 1924),
Compton Mackenzie (*Extraordinary Women: Themes and Variations*, 1928),\(^{31}\) and H.D.
(*HERmione*, 1927; *Palimpsest*, 1926).\(^ {32}\) Gertrude Stein is of course at the forefront of an
art of fugue writing, in poetry and prose, and one of the most influential figures in
experimental narrative. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, itself a linear narrative,
Stein provocingly writes, “by refusal of the use of the subconscious Gertrude Stein
achieves a symmetry which has a close analogy to the symmetry of the musical fugue of
Bach” (50). This statement is perhaps a necessary reminder that one can no more
fundamentally write the subconscious, even in writing a psychic fugue state, than one can
write a musical fugue in prose; once the writer hauls up the unknown on the other end of
the line (Woolf’s metaphor of the writer as fisher in the subconscious)—the translation

---

\(^{31}\) The “theme” of Mackenzie’s satiric novel is a circle of women from several countries who
converge at the holiday island of Sirene after the end of World War I, and the “variations” are
their various deviations from normative sexuality and sociality. Mackenzie tries out a range of
combinations and re-combinations of these women’s distinct personalities for their humorous
effects. Mackenzie’s fanciful satire of this Sapphic community is at times incisive and at times
hateful, but it notably escaped, like Woolf’s *Orlando*, the scrutiny Radclyffe Hall’s book
received. Also of note are the books Mackenzie puts in the hands of his characters—a young
woman is given Bergson to distract her from her amorous carrying on with a young, lower class
Italian, (it succeeds in putting her to sleep); another much desired woman carries with her a slim
volume by André Gide, which she is never able to finish but highly recommends.

\(^{32}\) Another obvious title for this list of fugue-like texts would include Aldous Huxley’s 1928
*Point Counter Point*. A commentary on that text’s interplay of form and ethics is found in
Huxley’s 1936 *Eyeless in Gaza*. In chapter 22, “December 8, 1926,” Anthony visits his friend
Mark Staithes and observes the latter’s deliberate if covert self-punishment, which is seen in
Mark’s horridly decorated house and his keeping-on of an unfortunate woman. Nonetheless,
there is a piano and Mark’s playing suggests some consolation: Beethoven and Bach make it “just
conceivable that humanity might some day and somehow be made a little more John-Sebastian-
like. If there were no Well-Tempered Clavichord, why should one bother even to wish for
revolutionary change?” (213). When their conversation becomes mired in the “orthodox
Marxism,” a “new phase of the game played according to the old unchanging rules,” Mark plays
“Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D” to lift them into “another universe, a world where Babbitts and
Staitheses didn’t exist” (217)—for Mark, a world without himself.
from one element to another is disappointing, a fish out of water. Nonetheless, there is something in the casting of the line that is worthwhile.

Each of these modernist writers follow Marcel Proust’s “Overture” in reshaping fiction as the instrument (or net) best suited for pursuing the subject in time, the power of memory, and the creation of meaning. As Stephen Kern has shown, by the end of the First World War, new technologies (particularly the cinema), the establishment of the study of psychoanalysis, and new theories of time significantly influenced modernist narratives. My attempt to link re-conceptualizations of the influence of memory in the subject’s perception of time and space in the 1920s with an outbreak of a lyric narrative art of fugue writing does seem unlikely, particularly since the twenties brought new artistic mediums such as the cinema that offered perhaps better analogies than the outmoded musical fugue. Nonetheless, these authors’ make the link within their texts: Stein supports (by negating) a connection of writing the subconscious with the composition of a Bach fugue in a self-reflexive text; Woolf’s and H.D.’s image-plots align the fugue pattern with the artist’s re-composition of experience in time and space.

---

33 See *A Room of One’s Own* (5) and “Professions for Women”: Woolf asks us “to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand […] The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water” (287). Stein’s *Autobiography* was written in 1932, and is considered part of her “comprehensible” nonfiction style, coming after the more complex, abstract, and playful period of 1927-1931, which included the prose book *How to Write*, a better example of Stein’s self-reflexive, fugue writing (Bridgman 376-9). Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, although written in 1906-08, would not be published until 1925 by Contact Editions in Paris (publishers of H.D.’s work). Woolf read and rejected Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* for the Hogarth Press, but did publish Stein’s *Composition as Explanation* in 1926 (Marcus 171).

34 An art of fugue writing disrupts Erich Kahler’s narrative of an “inward turn.” The simultaneous movement inward (psychoanalytic “tunneling”) and outward (crafting a new novelistic form) is expressed in the self-reflexive turns of these modernist works.
It is Wyndham Lewis’s damning remarks that offer the most succinct proof of this unlikely correlation. In *Time and Western Man* (1928), Lewis denounces Henri Bergson’s thought and its practitioners:

> Without all the uniform pervasive growth of the time-philosophy starting from the little seed planted by Bergson, discredited, and now spreading more vigorously than ever, there would be no *Ulysses*, or there would be no *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. There would be no ‘time-composition’ of Miss Stein; no fugues in words. (89)

As Lewis’s protestation attests, the temporal concept of perception, how perception might be understood as a synthesizing of one’s immediate present moment with cumulative memory, was elaborated by philosophers who were formative to modernism. The modernist experiments with the lyric mode in narrative which sought to depart from spatial and “linear” orientations to pursue temporal and recursive orientations, and which displace the dramatic climax with significant “moments,” take place in the “moment” of the debates of Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and William James regarding the role of “memory in perception” (Kern 42-43). The particular “moment” that writers such as Woolf, H.D., and Stein sought to express, a lesbian or Sapphic scene, could not be expressed in the hegemonic discourses and established narratives of previous decades. Thus, simultaneous with a move toward the lyric mode to write a narrative that should not be written (love between women without men), was a move toward aesthetic forms that rejected linear narrative for its failure to express an individual’s sense of time and memory.35

---

35 Friedman, whose approach negotiates between “post-structuralist and non-post-structuralist feminist discourses, between materialist and linguistic interpretive strategies” (x), rightly emphasizes that a “[c]ircular narrative structure” does not a lesbian construction of desire make, and does not mean that “linear narratives [are] all heterosexual” (*Penelope’s Web* 198-99).
Authors such as Woolf, H.D., and Stein followed Bergson, Husserl, and James in taking up the analogy of music (a better approximation than the analogy of “a stream” for the writer) to express a new mode of understanding perception and for expressing being. Bergson, in *Duration and Simultaneity*, likewise describes consciousness as an unfolding melody.\(^{36}\) In composing a story, novel, or a character’s consciousness like the unfolding of a fugue and drawing attention to that structure, these writers underscore these philosophers’ hypotheses. The past, as Kern writes, must remain in consciousness for us to hear the “melody” of the present and anticipate a future (44). The particular emphasis of these writers is the transformation the past undergoes in consciousness, revealing its transposition and the process of composition. Like Bergson, who “based his theory of knowledge on the way we know ourselves in time” (Kern 45), their attempts at an art of fugue writing were aesthetic explorations of theories of knowledge and being: such a thematic turn required a turn in narrative form, and such a turn away from conventional narrative expectations sought a transformation in readers’ engagement with the text and

Rather, her point is that the “spiral narrative,” in such works as H.D.’s *HER*, “represents a lesbian critique of the androcentric and heterocentric structure of Oedipal narrative patterns” (199).

\(^{36}\) Although literary criticism tends to focus on Bergson’s 1889-1907 texts (from *Time and Free Will* to *Creative Evolution*), his importance in political and literary circles continued throughout the twenties (he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927). Bergson’s 1921 *Duration and Simultaneity* emerged from a debate with Einstein in 1919. Fiction writers who were influenced by Bergson’s thought would have been less interested in Bergson’s mathematics (insufficient or not) in the text, than in his emphasis on time’s non-linearity, his use of metaphor and image, and his philosophy’s emphasis on multiplicity. (Woolf and H.D. each use a concept of “non-being” and similarly conceptualize time and memory). In *Duration and Simultaneity*, Bergson seeks to demonstrate that Einstein’s postulate of the reciprocity of motion contradicts not the positing of a single, real time but the positing of multiple, real times. According to Bergson, we have not analyzed our representation of time according to our sense of real duration, our feeling of time as multiple flows; physics has thus analyzed space and time relations by oscillating between the standpoints of Einstein’s “bilateral” and Lorentz’s “unilateral” theory of relativity.
their world. 37 Bergson’s “metaphysics implies an epistemology and an ethic. It is not enough that we properly understand time—we must learn to live it; on it everything else turns” (Kern 46). Of this cache of fugue-like texts, Woolf’s and H.D.’s most prominently carry with them an epistemological and ethical imperative; in both texts the protagonist is a young woman shown reading her world and attempting to secure or create models that are alternatives to a patriarchal, heterosexist norm. Further, the form of these texts models new experiential modes and invites readers to collaborate in the re-composition of the text. Moreover, in contrast to Stein, both writers write with a distinct awareness of the limits of an aestheticism playing loudly to an empty house.

If Woolf and H.D. share a rejection of a patriarchal norm in their ethic, then de-centering or making relative that norm would be key in their texts. The passage from an “inner time” to a universal or “time of things” experienced simultaneously is represented in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and The Waves and in H.D.’s HERmione both in the mimetic description of characters’ experiences (readers are privileged to the process of the maturing consciousnesses of the characters) and the authors’ synthetic use of form (which moves from a fugal inner time to an impersonal “time of things” to suggest a simultaneity of frames of reference).

Both Woolf and H.D. use a passage back and forth from “inner time” to “an impersonal time” (Bergson 47) to represent epistemological processes and to establish an

37 Bergson’s theories, which set Proust in search of lost time, struck a chord with the new direction modernists sought. “No question has been more neglected by philosophers than that of time; and yet they all agree in declaring it of capital importance. This is because they begin by ranking space with time,” which is a “wholly external and superficial” analogy that ultimately circumvents a philosopher from ever actually dealing with time (Bergson 6).
ethic: that is, in the back and forth between a young character’s point of view and an impersonal vantage of the narrator, Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and *The Waves* and H.D.’s *HERmione* exemplify a sympathetic understanding of others’ experiences, a de-centering of ego, and an understanding of language and art as an attempt to move between the self and other, the self and “impersonal time.”

Woolf’s lyric interludes in *The Waves*, her attempts to articulate “the world seen without a self” (287) which nonetheless require a speaker, and many of H.D.’s similar imagist poems reflect these authors attempts to express an “impersonal time.”

The fundamental dialectic of the lyric narratives examined here is that of the contingent time of the subject in narrative and the lyric’s timeless time: on the one hand, Woolf’s “moment of being” and H.D.’s intuitive imagist “transparent expression” (Morris 276) and, on the other hand, Woolf’s granite structure and H.D.’s “oceanic” sense.

---

38 Bergson writes that “we pass from this inner time to the time of things” by gradually extending our sense of “duration to the whole physical world” (45). What is striking in Bergson’s description of the process of the human construction of a concept of universal time—an extension of time as we tend to think of it in the linear progression of our lives, of narrative, to a kind of impersonal and thus “timeless” lyric time—is its depiction of the human impulse to mysticism: the notion of “an impersonal consciousness that is the link among all individual consciousnesses, as between these consciousnesses and the rest of nature” (45). This impersonal consciousness applies equally to a concept of an impersonal god, or to a Jungian collective unconscious, or to Woolf’s “pattern behind the cotton wool” which of course is not god (“A Sketch of the Past” 73).

39 The lyric mode offering “the world seen without a self” may be considered as part of a response to the specter of feminine lyricism (here meaning poetic verse). Eileen Gregory writes, “A familiar shade has haunted the female lyricist and the perception of her work throughout this century—the specter of the Poetess. Within recent tradition the Poetess is identified with the prolific, sentimental ‘songbird’ of nineteenth century romanticism” (“Sea Garden” 129). “H.D. in her essay ‘The Wise Sappho’ might be describing this veiled and complex figure who gives sanction and potency to her lyric song” (“Sea Garden” 137). Describing how H.D. concludes that the name Sappho has become “one with her poems and one with the power of her poems,” “an island,” Gregory writes, “Sappho’s mortal durability is significant—her poetry, rose/ rock/ island/ sea, is the timeless matter of ephemeral feeling and ephemeral speech at the basis of lyric expression” (“Sea Garden” 138).
2.7 “Stars Wheel in Purple”: H.D.’s HERmione

H.D.’s novel HERmione (1927) alternately immerses readers in its central character’s unfolding, fugue-like mental crisis and pulls back to a more distant, authorial perspective, enabling readers to register the character’s interior monologue as a poetic departure from the narrative context around her.40 The novel’s opening portrays the character Hermione Gart (known to family and friends as Her) circling through the woods near her father’s home while her mind spirals through a fugue-like crisis regarding her experience of identity and perception of time. H.D. expresses this crisis grammatically in the play on Her’s name and a Steinian use of the continuous present: “Her Gart went round in circles. ‘I am Her,’ she said to herself; she repeated, ‘Her, Her, Her” (3). Her’s statement, and its attendant image of slipping and drowning for the lack of a “star-sign,” announces a theme that will recur throughout the novel. Her’s crises are expressed visually by the heterodiegetic narrator in Her’s perception of her location in space and time. In locating herself in space and time, Her uses the mathematical discourse she’s just failed in at college as well as her father’s and brother’s alienating scientific discourse: “Pennsylvania whirled round her in cones of concentric colour, cones . . . concentric . . . conic sections [...] would whirl forever round her for she had grappled with the biological definition, transferred to mathematics, found the whole thing untenable” (5-6).41

40 In Penelope’s Web, Friedman importantly shows how HERmione uses the imagery of Pound’s “lyric” poetry in order to deconstruct and then reappropriate that imagery; however, H.D.’s use of Pound’s imagery is not necessarily in the lyric mode (as I use that term in this study).

41 Like Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Susan Stanford Friedman’s otherwise useful reading of the text confounds the narrator, character, and author: “Invoking psychoanalysis, the narrator is analyst to
The opening scene, with its imagery and grammatical approximation of circling, also initiates the reader into the text’s narrative play of mimetic and synthetic dimensions. The narrator emphasizes a simultaneous sense of Her’s crises as unfolded and unfolding. The use of the continuous present in the story-time intimates unfolding crises; the narrator’s commentary on Her’s crises suggests the crises are unfolded and now being measured, and yet the narrator’s telling of the story from a time distant from the story-time nonetheless emphasizes that these crises are merely better described, not necessarily resolved after the passage of time. The narrator marks a temporal distance from Her by describing Her’s situation using newly coined terms from psychoanalytic discourse that Her “could not [at that moment] predict”; although psychoanalysis will later provide “uncommon syllogisms” to describe Her’s “arrested development” and “failure complex,” it seems that, despite these labels, the crises are ever unfolding (3). The narrator’s use of disorienting fugue-like grammar and visual imagery to represent Her’s consciousness allows the reader to experience Her’s sense of entrapment in a labyrinth of discourses that cannot articulate her identity or experience, while simultaneously offering

her own troubled younger self” (Penelope’s Web 83). Adalaide Morris’s How to Live / What to Do: H.D.’s Cultural Poetics shifts the critical discussion of H.D. from psychoanalytic biography and canon debates to H.D.’s texts and “a wider discussion of the relationship between poetic forms and cultural meanings” (13). Morris also analyzes H.D.’s grounding in and use of scientific discourses and star imagery: “[h]er first sustained explorations of this cultural matrix occur in HERmione, a comic bildungsroman in which she blasts free of all her mentors” (161). This work establishes H.D.’s “standpoint,” the “mythopoeic mind (mine) [HERmione 76]” which is “the particular clock or ruler by which Hermione measures the world,” that is “simultaneously, a “mind (mine),” a repository of materials with more than personal or subjective provenance as well as an entry into “the mysterious,” which for Einstein, da Vinci, and Freud is “the cradle of true art and true science” (167).
an impersonal vantage that allows the reader to share with the implied author a vision of a theoretical “way out” that is, as yet, not possible in practice (3).42

HERmione shares remarkable similarities with Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” as well as the dialectical mode of Woolf’s lyric narrative. Both texts are revisions of the male writer (active) and female muse (passive) tradition.43 Although both create a space of Sapphic bonding between creative women, H.D.’s much longer text critiques the feasibility of such an ideal (as does Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway). In both texts, the narrator holds up the female protagonist as an exemplary figure with the potential to break from patriarchal, conventional narratives that constrain women, but not without a certain critical distance. In HERmione, Her gropes for a reflection of her sense of self and has been disappointed and trapped by the social discourses she’s encountered. Science and the patriarchal family fail her: the “Gart theorem of mathematical biological dropped out Hermione” (4). The established “feminine” arts represented in her mother’s

42 In “Romantic Thralldom in H.D.,” DuPlessis summarizes the plot of HERmione:
Morose after a failing year at college, moping about in a midsummer heat wave, Her ends a season of love (wooed by George, alias Ezra Pound) and a season of breakdown (involved with Fayne) with one clear decision: Her will go to Europe, unmarried. This decision, though important in H.D.’s life, seems anticlimactic in the novel, which does not really close but merely stops with the convenient discovery of some companions with whom to make that journey. (407) Given DuPlessis’s overarching argument of the thralldom of the heterosexual romance plot, her blasé choice of “seems anticlimactic” seems odd, as well as her reading of the text as H.D.’s justification for her “decision not to marry Pound” (407). However, it is attributable to DuPlessis’s emphasis on reading H.D.’s texts as symptomatic of “the almost endless battle of H.D.’s psychic life” (408).

43 Friedman argues that “HER’s narrative invokes in order to revoke the male economy of desire”:
H.D. [is] engaged in a self-reflexive, combative intertextuality. HER resonates with a number of specific formulations that epitomize the muse tradition— from the mythic figures of Pygmalion and Galataea, Orpheus and Eurydice, and the mermaid Undine; down through the lyric conventions established by the troubadours, Petrarch, Dante, and Shakespeare; into the contemporary period. (Penelope’s Web 106-7)
amateur painting and her music lessons fail her: she realizes “that people can not paint nor put [her vision of the world] to music” (6). Her’s “inner vision,” associated with the ocean and deep water, is at odds with her mother, whose “fibers were rooted and mossed over” and is associated with the suffocating Pennsylvania forest and their garden (9). The narrator explains that while Her “was not in the world, unhappily she was not out of the world,” and although she desires to “be out” of it, Her clings with a “psychic claw” to “trivial vestiges” as she feels “her mind filmed over with grey-gelatinous substance of some sort of nontinking, of some sort of nonbeing” (8). The narrator uses a terse and comedic distance from her protagonist at the beginning of the text which increasingly dissolves until Her’s interior discourse takes center stage by the end. The narrator’s vantage tempers readers’ exasperated reaction to what might seem hysterical circling by noting, “Hermione could not then know that her precise reflection, her entire failure to conform to expectations was perhaps some subtle form of courage” (4). Indeed, Fanny and Her, as young women that move back and forth between a position “in the world” and a desire to “be out” of it, are fitting characters for a lyric narrative. The passages in a lyric mode are prompted by Her’s frustrated search for an other whose vision will see her artistic potential and thus draw her out of the hysterical circles of her immediate narrative context (a repressive, gendered social order figured in her parents’ roles) and into a space of creative possibility and inspiration.

Unformulated by the discourses of the patriarchal family, the male-dominated sciences or the female domestic sciences, Her is not yet able to find a mode to express her self. Even the literary world, represented by George Lowndes, is fraught for Her; she is transformed by George into a “cold Laconian birch tree” (219). Nonetheless, it is
literature that offers Her reflections or flashes of a “way out” (75). Before George arrives on the scene, Her identifies her name as coming from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. This kinship with Shakespeare, “I am out of this book,” offers a healing image of flowing water: “running like healing water across an arid waste” (32). Prefiguring Woolf’s philosophy in “A Sketch of the Past,” H.D.’s Her is able to move out from a world of nonbeing by seeing (with the aid of literature) an underlying universal dimension or connecting pattern; her experience is one iteration of the “oceanic feeling” described by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Taking up the “Temple Shakespeare” leads Her to think, “I am the word AUM,” and a “frightening” flow of thoughts: “God is in a word. God is in a word. God is in HER. She said, ‘HER, HER, HER. I am Her, I am Hermione . . . I am the word AUM’” (32). This declaration is an early significant restatement of Her’s opening theme—“‘I am Her,’ she said to herself” (3). Her’s consciousness (as it is composed by the narrator) begins unfolding its own fugue in counterpoint to the discourses that fail her. In contrast to Edouard’s projected

---

44 In George’s pursuit of Her through the woods, Her is dissociated from the amorous scene. She observes that his kisses “smudge out” the concentric circles of the trees but smudge Her out as well (73); although George is “almost Orlando” and “Orlando kiss doesn’t affect the back of my head”—thus allowing her to think of her first meeting with Fayne and how Fayne’s image in a “convex mirror” deconstructs space while Her remains “not touched” by the “rather chivalrous really, kiss of George” (74). Nonetheless, Her learns from George her “gambler’s heritage […] words that were coin; save, spend; and all the time George Lowndes with his own counter, had found her a way out” (75). Ultimately as this scene foreshadows, she must learn that George’s “way out” is counterfeit and Her’s words must be given as gifts not capital.

45 The term is coined by the poet Romain Rolland in a letter in response to Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (1927); and while Freud claims he cannot discover the feeling in himself, H.D. and Woolf describe it frequently in their journals and published writing (XXI: 64-5).
fugue writing in *The Counterfeiters*, Her’s fugue-like discovery of her own literary identity takes mysticism as part of its warp and woof.\(^{46}\)

George, who promised the “new” and a “way out” with his literary ties in Europe and his initial encouragement of her writing, must be repudiated at the end of the novel. George’s character evokes a Pater-like decadence that will freeze Her’s attempts to pursue her own art and identity. Her comes to realize George’s view of her:

The thing in him was nebulous, was the edges of things, was the Renaissance, burning with reflected glory. He wanted Her, but he wanted a Her that he called decorative. George wanted a Her out of the volumes on the floor […] from about the middle, the glorious flaming middle, the Great Painters (that came under Florence) section. (172)

Engaged to George, Her will become the art object, not the writer catching light and heat. Seeing his seduction-courtship scenes as “out of some bad novel” (172), Her’s confidence in her own identity as a writer (rather than as what is written) grows. When Her does speak as “HER precisely,” rather than as George’s decoration or as Fayne’s reflection, she “spoke out of the moment on moments she had carefully used for this minor motive, using all moments but this moment as a web to catch” (188). Her’s identity moves from her sense of being a character trapped in a web of discourses and a cocoon of nonbeing, to her figuring herself as a spider who spins a web and as a

\(^{46}\) George’s reaction to Her’s relationship with Fayne prefigures Woolf’s discussion of “Shakespeare’s Sister” in *A Room of One’s Own*: he tells Her, “you and she should have been burnt as witches” (172). Both Woolf and H.D. were interested in their ancestors’ Quaker mysticism. Jane Marcus has written of the importance of Woolf’s aunt Caroline Stephen’s *Quaker Strongholds* and *The Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance*, as a source of Woolf’s “rational mysticism” and “moments of being” (104-45). H.D. returns throughout her work to her Moravian heritage (particularly in *The Gift*); in *HERmione* she writes of a “God in silence” found in the land settled by Quakers (199). Woolf described her desire to “write silence” as she works on *The Waves*, “an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem,” but recognized “there may be affectation in being too mystical, too abstract,” in writing “the thing that exists when we aren’t there” (*D 3*: 203, 114)
composer ordering her moments. The minor motives of her failed romances with George and Fayne counterpoint the major motive of HERmione as Kunstlerroman—Her’s discovery of a viable identity as a writer. Like Woolf, H.D. develops dialectical image-plots in her text—fabric and transparency, pattern and incandescence, web and moment. H.D. uses this dialectic of metaphors in Her’s meetings with Fayne and then George in the scene that heralds Her’s departure from the pattern of the “minor motives” that threaten to trap Her as a character in a “bad novel.”

Her has idealized Fayne as the beloved who can see and value her submerged creative identity. In their courtship scene, she quotes fragments of Swinburne’s “Itylus” to Fayne, since Her believes “I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her. She is some amplification of myself”: “thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow, but the world will end, the world will end when I forget” (158, 159). When Fayne fails her, negating “Her and all the poems I slaved over,” Her reflects, “Were all the poems no use? Some poems are useful one way, some poems another” (160). Jane Marcus reads Woolf’s use of “Itylus” (Swinburne’s rewriting of the Procne and Philomela myth) in Between the Acts as a rewriting that emphasizes “that ‘what we must remember’ is the rape; ‘what we must forget’ is the male rewriting of history” (Languages of Patriarchy 76). Marcus’s analysis usefully draws attention to Woolf’s use of the myth’s images of weaving, reading the story in the pattern, and the transformation of the voiceless into timeless, singing birds. However, in a footnote, Marcus, like many

47 As the title Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.’s Fiction underscores, Friedman reads the metaphor of fabric and weaving for the woman writer as central to H.D.’s work. Friedman opens the way for a reading of H.D.’s evolving prose work as shuttling between lyric (associated in H.D.’s work with images of marble) and narrative (associated with images of weaving) (88).
critics who fail to distinguish between H.D.’s narrators and characters and H.D. as implied author, argues that H.D.’s HERmione is an example of “a contemporary and uncritical feminist use of Swinburne’s poem” (199). However, H.D. uses the poem in remarkably the same way that Woolf will: Marcus writes, “In Between the Acts Woolf ironically lets Bart adapt Swinburne to his own concerns. […] Swinburne’s suggestion that both sisterhood and revenge are unnatural reveals his failure to understand the implications of the myth, as Woolf’s development of the theme will show” (93). In HERmione, Her, not H.D, has used the poem “uncritically” in her initial identification with Fayne; Fayne is not the sister or lover that can subvert the pattern of history or revenge a rape—as H.D.’s development of the theme will show. As Her begins to realize the betrayals of Fayne and George, Swinburne’s ventriloquism is given a twist; indeed, H.D. repeats the lines in Her’s subsequent delirium with a critical intent to expose Fayne and George as collaborators in the untenable narratives she has sought to escape.

Fayne, portrayed as attempting to manipulate Her with a sham spiritualism and echoing George, tells Her, “Your writing is nothing really. It is the pulsing of a willow, the faint note of some Sicilian shepherd. Your writing is the thin flute holding you to eternity” (161). Nonetheless, Her painstakingly tries to maintain her view of Fayne as a Grecian “marble” “boy hunter,” and leans in to kiss Fayne: “Her bent forward, face bent toward Her. A face bends towards me and a curtain opens,” but when Her says, “And I—I’ll make you breathe, my breathless statue,” Fayne replies, “Statue? You—you are the statue” (163). Her is again trapped in “rings on rings of circles as if they had fallen into a deep well and were looking up”; her sister swallow is no ideal alternative to George (164). Fayne calls Swinburne (and by implication, Her’s quoting of “Itylus”) “decadent”
because “innocence is indecent” (164). Her is drawn up short, as Her hears George’s words echoed in Fayne’s and sees that Fayne objectifies her just as George has (164).

In the next scene, after Fayne has left and George arrived, encouraging her to play the piano, Her reflects that George had “got [her] loose” from the “tangle” of her family, and that Fayne had made “a curtain open” (166). George has the “odd thing” that “liked her playing. […] Mistakes that tore the fabric for Her, to George were simply vaguely pleasant dissonance, meaning nothing as long as the fabric of the sonata or the fugue or prelude stayed secure,” and so “Her ran and ran arpeggios” (166). Her, who has seen Fayne as a statue only to then find that Fayne sees Her as the marble, looks upon George as “Georgio out of Venetian pictures, out of the renaissance section of the two great volumes” (an image that she will invert, as quoted above, so that George is the connoisseur and she the “decorative” art object) (167). The fabric is torn for Her as she plays the arpeggios: “Water ran off her fingers. ‘It’s horrible not really being able to make music’,” she tells him, and George replies, “You do, Hermione. Your melic chorisos [her poems] aren’t half so bad as simply rather rotten” (167). With water “running under her fingers,” Her reassesses the “minor motives” she’s been playing—although George has enabled her to elude the “Gart formula,” she is now a “counter” in George’s dealings with the literary avant-garde: the worth of Her’s writing itself is of little value to Fayne or to George, who value Her’s naïve novelty instead (167, 75). Again mirroring her scene with Fayne, Her sees “Georg like a stone thrown into a well” and her own “sursurring water music [as] out of a bad novel” (168). Her’s laughter, which breaks out and shakes the room she and Fayne had sat in and shakes the roof of her parents’ house, heralds not only Her’s rejection of George’s engagement but also her
realization and subversion of Fayne’s manipulation: “I love Her, only Her, Her, Her” (170). Not only does Her realize that she is being used as a “counter” or “coin” by Fayne and by George, but she realizes that she has used each of them as counters to pay her way out, hoping each might catch and reflect the light of her own artistic identity (75). Her’s “I love Her, only Her, Her, Her” (170), echoes the opening theme but with an ominous twist as she admits a narcissism that may, nonetheless, be necessary in pursuing a “precise definition” of herself.

Writing is ultimately the “way out” that Her pursues at the end of the text—transformed after a hallucinatory illness and talking cure with her nurse Amy Dennon.48 As her mind sorts the “carnations” she sees in her sickroom and the nurse’s instructions, Her moves in and out of consciousness, having successfully moved out of time and space through illness, until a card that was left with “white lilac” makes a “pattern on her tired brain” and initiates her reordering of memory and time (195-97). Nurse Dennon, who (rather than Fayne) functions as the Julia Craye figure, is her encouraging auditor in the long free association that follows Her’s admission that “I’m tired of not talking. It seems I have never talked. I want to talk and talk forever” (200). Through Her’s fugue-like re-

48 This long scene bears an extensive comparison with Woolf’s essay “On Being Ill” (1926). The talking cure as necessary preparation for writing reappears throughout H.D.’s work. Notably, H.D. figured her successive work with three different analysts, Mary Chadwick, Hanns Sachs, and finally Sigmund Freud, as giving her “an added sense of values—as if one had been having music lessons, first with a good teacher, then with a master, then with a genius” in a letter to Conrad Aiken ([September 23 or 30?] 1933, F 383). Significantly, after analysis with Freud, she received his permission in October 1935 to begin analysis with Walter Schmideberg who proved the necessary compliment to Freud. Comparing him to Freud, H.D. wrote Bryher that Schmideberg “is really so nice and reliable, more like a feather-bed than gem-like flame.” As H.D. wrote to Aiken, Freud brought the cerebral intensity that seemed to her “a bar of radium at the back of my head,” a pattern and “structure,” whereas Schmideberg, “so good at re-threading and re-stitching,” made H.D. feel “well knitted,” as she wrote to Bryher (9 May 1936) (qtd. in Penelope’s Web 292).
ordering of the moments that the narrator of HERmione has thus far presented, Her is shown gaining a critical perspective and fine-tuning her compositional powers.

Associating the flowers of her sickroom with the rose in her mother’s garden and a memory of her mother’s statement: “‘It’s what your grandmother used to say when I laughed like that,’ (so she [her mother] must have laughed like that), ‘there’s a black rose growing in your garden.’” Carnation Lily Lily Rose” (201).49 Her thinks back through her mothers’ and sisters’ pattern in history and rewrites Swinburne’s line with an ironic critique: “for art thou a rose my sister white sister” (208).50 Her states, “Laughter. You know. Opens doors. They turn on hinges” (208). Her’s laughter in the text, as Bergson’s “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic” can expound, is key in marking the character’s ability to “open doors,” to step outside of her own ego, to assess the narratives that she has been habitually circling in, and to sympathetically connect with readers who are then granted permission to laugh at the serious banality of playing a puppet and mechanically following prescribed roles.

Her usurps the role of creator from George and rejects her role as “decorative”: leaving the sickroom and walking in the snow (“Now the creator was Her’s feet”), she thinks of the irony of the lines she attributed (in talking to Amy Dennon) to Fayne, “Art thou a ghost my sister white sister there, art thou a ghost who knows . . .” (208, 223).

Not only does H.D. use Swinburne’s lines critically, but she also portrays the relationship

49 “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose” is a painting by John Singer Sargent and a line from Joseph Mazzinghi’s song “Ye Shepherds Tell Me.”

50 The colors of this line pick up the Sapphic and androgynous threads of the text, as well as a racial commentary. Her has identified Mandy, the black servant as a rare ally in negotiating the patriarchal labyrinth. Her defense of Mandy against George occasions “the longest speech [he] ever heard from […] Hermione” (168). This black rose and its laughter appears in The Gift.
of Fayne and Her critically. H.D. questions the power dynamics of the relationship that both Her and Fayne exact. Fayne is not an unproblematic ideal or “way out” for Her and indeed fails to respond to Her’s lofty aims. Her tells Fayne that they are part of a constellation of others, “people like you and me” who hold to “valiant intellectual standards,” and that their interaction is a “[c]erebralism burning at its incandescent white heat beats in the air. Images form, we can’t talk in mere words” (218). Her had hoped that the two of them would be a light shining from “a new world,” but it seems that such a light is solitary: she tells Amy in her delirium, “[t]here is always, isn’t there, in the heart of a new world that is forming, just that center, that pin-point of incandescence that holds the thing together?” (206). Her must learn that that pin-point light is not in George or Fayne, and what she was drawn to in both was a reflection of her own incandescence. Fayne, not willing to live up to Her’s idealism and vision of a Sapphic transcendence, admits that she loves George. Thus, H.D. casts a critical eye on Her’s idealism of realizing a Sapphic utopia in their current world as well as Her’s own motives—the theme of narcissism is left troublingly open.

Explaining H.D.’s choice not to publish the piece, despite carefully revising the typescript and placing it under the direction of Norman Pearson, DuPlessis and Friedman argue that unlike Woolf’s *Orlando*, which uses fantasy as a “distancing device,” and Gertrude Stein’s works, in which “extraordinary linguistic innovations” are nonetheless an “obsculting device,” “HER operates within a much more accessible system of coded personae,” an easily discoverable biographical key, and her “imagistic innovations in
interior monologue in no way masks lesbian passion” (“Sexualities” 215). In contrast to Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, H.D. “investigates lesbian difference from heterosexual norms and presents the love between Her and Fayne as a liberating gestalt of psychic, aesthetic, and erotic passion” (“Sexualities” 216). DuPlessis and Friedman analyze H.D.’s published texts as sites where H.D. examines “her identity as a tormented heterosexual seeking non-oppressive relationships,” while her unpublished manuscripts are “‘safe’ as the diary” as the site for H.D.’s exploration of “her passion for women and its relation to her artistic identity” (“Sexualities” 208). Although they persuasively argue that H.D. struggled to free her artistic identity by turning to prose from the narrow scope dictated by Pound’s marketing of her imagist persona, DuPlessis and Friedman unfortunately circumscribe her prose works by rendering them mere symptoms of the author. In a desire to find the utopia of a “liberating gestalt of psychic, aesthetic, and erotic passion” in Fayne and Her’s lesbian relationship, DuPlessis and Friedman must ignore the implicit critique of that relationship in the text—H.D.’s portrayal of Fayne’s ruthlessness, snobbery, and manipulation, and Her’s troubled assumption of the muse-artist binary. Instead, they write that although “H.D.’s vision of the twin sister-lovers, the doubling amoebic cell” is influenced by “Freud’s association of narcissism with homosexuality” and leads to “lyrical and linguistic fusions,” H.D.’s vision “contains none of Freud’s normative belief that narcissistic love represents ‘megalomania,’ or ‘arrested’

51 Lawrence Rainey claims that H.D. decided to withhold works from publishing “because she assumed that the public was unworthy of being addressed” (154). However, Adalaje Morris and Georgina Taylor offer more persuasive and supported readings of H.D.’s choice.
development” (218).\textsuperscript{52} However, H.D. explicitly evokes narcissism in Her’s disillusionment with the promise of both George and Fayne as the privileged others who will reflect her talent and recognize her uniqueness (170). A talking cure—a powerful lyric turn in the text—with Nurse Dennon is necessary for Her to recover from the failure of either of Her’s hopes and to come to terms with the artist’s narcissism.

Nonetheless, H.D. does not end her text either with an idealist vision of the young artist forging across the snowy field of her soul the uncreated poetry of her precise definition. Rather, Fayne returns, with the possibility of her continued manipulation of Her, in the closing lines of text. Her has returned from her trip through the snow with feet “winged with the winged god’s sandal” as she has found passage to Europe with her neighbors and will pay for it with the money “they said they’d give me for my trousseau,” and has thus achieved the lyric transcendence she has been seeking, feeling “one with herself, with the world, with all outer circumstance” (234). That is, until she “ barged straight into Mandy,” who tells Her, “I done left Miss Fayne all alone upstairs in your little workroom” (234). The ominous note of this revelation is offset only by the possibility that Her’s view of Fayne has been transposed from Fayne as beloved (in which Her’s identity is the minor motive to Fayne’s) to muse (in which Fayne’s identity is kept separate, inspiring her art). Nonetheless, the latter will perpetuate a duality that separates Her from a oneness “with all outer circumstance.” Until the final lines, Her offers an affirmative vision of the female protagonist honing her artistic skills as does

\textsuperscript{52} Elsewhere, DuPlessis emphasizes the non-normative influence of Freud: “her tribute (or gift) to Freud being first the presence-to-be-reckoned-with of his particular permutation of consciousness—her visions—and second the affirmation of (un)readability, that is, the possibility of meditating upon but never fixing or pinning any sign” (261).
Woolf’s story through the character Fanny. Declaring herself “in love with . . . nothing” (219), Her has, through the course of her illness, returned to “the shell in order to emerge full fledged”; she has felt her Sapphic “moment” with Fayne “pass into all moments, the great majority of moments that are dead moments”; and she has finally emerged in a world in which all “had been erased, would be written on presently” (221-2). Thus, the Her who will face Fayne waiting in her workroom at the end of HERmione may have gained a perspective on her fugue-like crises, composed her moments in her talking cure, and may now move into her unfolding narrative with the consciousness of a narrator or composer of her moments. As DuPlessis’s reading of the ending as “merely stop[ping]” (“Thralldom” 407) suggests, H.D.’s conclusion evokes a particularly ambivalent response in the reader. After offering the reader a vision of Her as embodiment of the woman writer discovering her own voice, rejecting circumscribing romantic narratives, and able to navigate the world’s passages, H.D. destabilizes that vision with Fayne’s return. The reader must continue the story his or herself, drawing upon the re-composition of experience that Her has given in her fugue-like talking cure, to spin out the scenes that might follow Mandy’s announcement.

In comparing the rhetorical relationship of author and reader for Woolf and Stein, Marcus writes, “The problem with Stein is that she doesn’t trust her reader and will not share authority” (172). H.D. attempts to balance her authority and the reader’s freedom by aligning a knowing narrator with her reader and in refusing a tidy conclusion. In writing fugue-like texts, the difficulty these authors face is alienating readers by their virtuosity; Woolf and H.D. attempt to draw readers into, and thus invest readers in, the artistic process by strategically effacing their authorial presence and enlisting readers as
active participants.\(^{53}\) The distance between the implied author and H.D.’s character (established by the mediation of a wiser narrator) is particularly important in generating the “comic” aspect of H.D.’s “comic bildungsroman” (Morris, *How to Live* 161). H.D. draws the reader to and then distances the reader from Her throughout the text, and even the reader’s sympathy in Her’s potential redemption as an artist at the end of the text is undercut by the closing line announcing that Fayne is waiting in Her’s workroom. By leaving open the ambivalence of the power relationship of artist and muse, H.D. thus shows how women’s Sapphic bonding can subvert patriarchal oppression as well as the difficulty of creating an artist’s identity that rejects traditional models. Both Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts expose the narcissism of the artist as perhaps necessary and productive; this paradox, portrayed in the text and implicating the author, is comical when considered in its synthetic dimension—the relationship of author and reader. In making artistry the subject—Woolf wrote in her diary, “I want to trace my own process” (*D* 3: 113)—their subjects are self-reflexive. Self-reflexive writing may be the hallmark of modernist work, and self-reflexive satire within self-reflexive writing the hallmark of high modernist work as Andre Gide’s *Counterfeitors* suggests. Yet, this circling, this theme and variation, is not—for these writers—the modernist vacuum that critics have argued. The potential of the comic to “open doors,” even when we laugh at our entrapment, points to the ethic underlying Woolf’s and H.D.’s art of fugue writing. These texts open doors for a new

\(^{53}\) Identifying two modes of lyric, Phelan writes that the “authorial audience” is positioned as “participant[s]” rather than judgmental observers: While we recognize that the speaker is different from us, we move from that recognition toward fusion with the speaker—or, to put it in more measured terms, toward adopting the speaker’s perspective without any irritable reaching after difference and evaluation. This element of lyricality also depends on the absence of distance between the implied author and the ‘I’ of the poem. (162)
direction in aesthetics as well as the narratives readers take up in plotting their day-to-day lives, by expanding a society’s repertoire of stories and thus the range of our epistemological instruments.

2.8 Meta-fictional Metaphors and Woolf’s Narrative Turn

Work on good prose has three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven. (Benjamin, “One-Way Street” 77)

One aspect of the new direction Woolf takes in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” is the invitation the implied Woolf creates and the ideal reader she posits, an aspect not attended to in the current criticism. Similar to H.D.’s HERmione, the term “interior monologue” is misleading for this story. Excising the presence of a voice that narrates Fanny’s vision, Susan Clements attributes the “pronominal confusion” that characterizes key moments of the story to Fanny’s attempt to “distance herself as far as possible from dawning positions” (23). Such a reading misses the ways in which the implied author draws the reader closer, a parallel to Fanny desire to draw closer to Julia through her imaginative compositions, a desire which is represented by the stylistic contagion of the self-effacing narrator through such “pronominal confusion.” In acknowledging the implied author’s responsibility for these slippages, since it is Woolf who constructs the narrating voice that orchestrates the piece, we become aware of the invitation to play between the implied author and ideal reader that sets the pattern. Conversely, however, reading Woolf’s experiment as play for play’s sake, the creation of a seamless objet d’art, as in Dean Baldwin’s reading, only picks out a surface pattern and misses the nuances of figural narration in the story. That perfect round neglects the communication and
tenuous exchange between Woolf and her ideal audience. The ambiguity of that exchange creates a residue of doubt, and it is that backdrop of uncertainty that illuminates the moment of triumph, which Woolf attempts to achieve by emphasizing paradox as the source of a moment of vision.

Woolf’s September 5, 1926 diary entry records her idea for the story and underscores her self-conscious theorizing of narrative voice, which comes to her as she finishes *To the Lighthouse*:

> As usual, side stories are sprouting in great variety as I wind this up: a book of characters; the whole string being pulled out from some simple sentence, like Clara Pater’s, ‘Don’t you find that Barker’s pins have no points to them?’ I think I can spin out their entrails this way; but it is hopelessly undramatic. It is all oratio obliqua. Not quite all; for I have a few direct sentences. (*D* 3: 106)

Although the metaphor of a “string being pulled” is important in relation to Woolf’s meta-fictional fabric, I am here interested in her use of “oratio oblique.” This term signals Woolf’s choice in developing the technique of interior monologue in relation to her predecessors Pater, Proust, and Sterne. As Dorrit Cohn writes, Proust criticizes the view of interior monologue in which “thought takes shape independent of language and that language is merely the vehicle, the container of an already accomplished thought,” the technique “he pointedly calls ‘l’oblique discours interieur,’ ‘oblique’ because it invariably draws attention away from more significant psychic realities” (79). Woolf, who describes herself as “embedded” in Proust in April 1925, seems to share this

---

54 Woolf’s diary and letters are peppered with Proust. She mentions a desire to finish Proust in July 1925, and she’s still “grind[ing] on at Proust” in May 1929 (*D* 3: 228). In July 1926, after a visit from H.G. Wells, she writes humorously of Wells’s volubility and records his remarks on James: “Henry James was a formalist. He always thought of clothes. He was never intimate with anyone” (*D* 3: 94). Woolf then abruptly switches to her own reflections on Wells’s writing: “Wells has learnt nothing from Proust—his book like the British Museum” (*D* 3: 94). Woolf
critique in her caveat “I have a few direct sentences,” but also attests to her awareness of the value of balancing a lyric mode (submerged within the obliquities of psychic realities) and narrative mode (drawn away into a linear progression). In the diary passage above, Woolf continues, “The lyric portions of To the L. are collected in the 10 year lapse, & don’t interfere with the text so much as usual. I feel as if it fetched its circle pretty completely this time” (D3: 106-107). Similarly, in A Room of One’s Own, Woolf’s narrator advises that the woman writer who would “catch those unrecorded gestures” of Chloe and Olivia, “unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex,” should take up as “oblique” a method as Proust’s: her author, Mary Carmichael, would need to “talk of something else, looking steadily out of the window” (84-5).

Nathalie Sarraute, herself influenced by Woolf, describes interior monologue as a “thin curtain” since it screens more than it reveals; it is “like the ribbon that comes clattering from a telescriptor slot” out of the “immense profusion of sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses, little larval actions that no inner language can convey, that jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness,” that cluster into groups and new forms, seemingly on their own (qtd. in Cohn 79-80). Cohn’s Transparent Minds includes Sarraute, Woolf, Proust and Sterne in a typological theory of narrative realism as tends to use Proust as a test case and incorporates Proust’s metaphors into her theories of fiction. For example, in Swann’s Way Proust uses the metaphor of “a transparent envelope” to describe how one’s own personality colors the way one perceives another (20); Marcel also describes memory as “a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being” (5-6). In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf calls for a fiction that can “convey” that: “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (106). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf orders her vision of life as “moments of being” that “were however embedded in many more moments of non-being” (70).
points traceable in a “cyclical (or spiral) return of the genre to its inward matrix” (9).55

Sarraute’s description aptly describes these other authors’ and particularly Woolf’s praxis in which image clusters (such as fabric and transparency) represent the subject’s attempt to grasp “sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses” and to string them into meaning, the unwinding ribbon that is itself woven by what Walter Pater has described as the “sympathetic selection” of a subject’s tapestry of experience (31). Compare, for example, Pater’s *Appreciations*:

> Into the mind sensitive to ‘form,’ a flood of random sounds, colours, incidents, is ever penetrating from the world without, to become, by sympathetic selection, a part of its very structure, and, in turn, the visible vesture and expression of that other world it sees so steadily within, nay, already with a partial conformity thereto, to be refined, enlarged, corrected, at a hundred points. (31)

To the celebrated passage from Woolf’s section of “Modern Fiction”:

> The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave […] there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style […]. 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. (106)

The recurrence of this metaphor throughout Woolf’s works suggests an underlying philosophy. In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Fanny composes Julia as making choices in her life in order to bring about days that are “a victory. It was something that lasted; something that mattered for ever. She strung the afternoon on the necklace of memorable

55 Cohn’s study on consciousness in third-person texts begins by emphasizing the trope of “transparencies” that “stand as metaphors for the singular power possessed by the novelist: creator of beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will” (4).
days, which was not too long for her to be able to recall this one or that one; this view, that city; to finger it, to feel it, to savour, sighing, the quality that made it unique” (109). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf orders her memoir piece according to her “moments of being” (also the title Woolf added to the story: “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points”), and her first recounted moments of being indeed concern images of fabric and transparency.

“Slater’s Pins Have No Points” itself stages, on the meta-fictional field, the artist’s and the subject’s negotiation of, as Sarraute says quoting Woolf, “the obscure places of psychology” in relation to the narrative channels of verbalization (Cohn 80). The lyric mode for Woolf is marked by the progression of such “symbol clusters” or “image-plots” as well as a shift to a narratorial presence which foregrounds the search for“truth and knowledge” (Lilienfeld 125). In the lyric mode, it is the latter more nebulous search that character, author, and audience are joined in that is the quest or “plot” of importance, rather than a narrative’s conventional climax or the determination of a judgment on a mimetic character. This shift in purpose marks the emphasis on a lyric mode embedded with narrative progression. The effect of “baring the device” is to destabilize “the omniscience and authority of the implied author and the constructed narrator” (Lilienfeld 125). Nonetheless, the technique also empowers the implied author and narrator through its very destabilization by creating a romance with the reader who must participate in the quest. In granting authority to the reader to read and re-cognize the image-plots, and thus guiding the reader as the beloved (rather than parading a mimetic beloved), the lyric radically secures power through its mutual tension.
The “thin curtain” of interior monologue is necessary to put into relief, make visible, the trope of transparency that is the desired goal of the artist. The recurring image of Julia’s cloak in Woolf’s story—“she stood fastening her cloak” (106) and “she would get up at six, put on her cloak” (108)—illustrates this paradox. Whereas Fanny has used the cloak as a realist detail in crafting narratives about Julia’s life, it looms up in an incorporeal form in the epiphanic moment of the story’s conclusion, the moment when Fanny’s imagining in the timeless realm of lyric enters the present moment of the story-time: “Julia Craye, sitting hunched and compact holding her flower, seemed to emerge out of the London night, seemed to fling it like a cloak behind her” (110). Here the cloak transforms from a fabric that conceals and contains Julia—“she was not so much dressed as cased, like a beetle compactly in its sheath” (103)—to the expansive fabric of life, a Pater-like recognition of subjectivity. The cloak of London’s night which Julia seems to fling behind her “seemed, in its barrenness and intensity, the effluence of her spirit, something that she had made which surrounded her [,which was her]. Fanny stared. All seemed transparent, for a moment, to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot, as if looking through Miss Craye” (110; brackets indicate *The Forum* inclusion).

This pivotal moment of the story points to Woolf’s theorization of the synthesis of form and being. In her 1927 essay “The Art of Fiction,” Woolf articulates the “failure” visible in the “aesthetic view of fiction” (as compared to the “humane” conception) as “some failure in relation to life” (*CE* 2: 53). Favorably reviewing Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, she “pin[s]” him to the point of view that “a triumph” in the novel “won at the expense of life is in fact a defeat” (*CE* 2: 53). Woolf claims that Forster’s judgment of Henry James comes from James having neglected human beings for “patterns which,
though beautiful in themselves, are hostile to humanity” (*CE* 2: 53). A similar analysis of Walter Pater’s aesthetics is found in “The Modern Essay.” Here, Woolf singles out Pater as an author that “has somehow contrived to get his material fused” in his “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci” (*CE* 2: 43). Pater’s hybrid, impressionist form achieves a “sudden boldness and metaphor” greater than even biography or fiction; “every atom of its surface shines” (*CE* 2: 44). However, Woolf cautions us against the “dangers” of such polish: “words coagulate together in frozen sprays” when “the current, which is the life-blood of literature, runs slow” (*CE* 2: 44). Since the audience’s interest is vital, Woolf argues that the “vision” must not be cut off from the “deeper excitement” of the flow of life (*CE* 2: 44). In counterpoint to James’s aesthetics, patterns “hostile to humanity,” and Pater’s aesthetics, anemic in closing off the “life-blood of literature,” Woolf elaborates her own humanist aesthetics.

Forster’s chapter “Pattern and Rhythm,” which shares many of Woolf’s views on Proust, may have influenced Woolf in writing “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster turns finally to “the general scheme,” an unnamed aspect of the novel, which he first approaches by borrowing from painting the term “pattern” and then borrowing from music the term “rhythm” (149). James’s works suffer for their rigid patterns, whereas he praises Proust’s work for its “repetition plus variation”: his work is “stitched internally […] it contains rhythms,” as the reappearance of the musical phrase allows “the establishment of beauty and the ravishing of the reader’s memory […] not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope” (Forster 165-8). Forster concludes that the novelist must strive for the equivalent of the relationship of movements in a symphony, which is
precisely Woolf’s aim in the late twenties as she writes “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and begins *The Waves*. The novelist’s ideas, according to Forster, should not be “completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom” (169).

In reading “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and its use of narrated monologue in this context, the question is whether the author has managed to balance pattern (the fugue-like structure) and transparency (the reader’s sense of participation) in order to fulfill Woolf’s aim of netting beauty, the moment of vision that adds to the reader’s vision of life, without blocking its flow. Does the reader find, to paraphrase Forster, that the story’s got rhythm? Both Forster and Woolf argue that form and matter must be fused with attention to the life-blood or rhythm of life. Thus, the implied author cannot create untouched from behind glass, nor can the work of art be sustained under a bell jar, if the reader is to “have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom” (Forster 169).

Woolf’s analysis of another precursor, Laurence Sterne, reveals how the author’s relationship with his or her implied reader is the missing element in James’s and Pater’s work. Describing Sterne’s description of Uncle Toby, Woolf praises the elasticity of Sterne’s sentences, which move in a new direction: “We go backwards instead of forwards. A simple statement starts a digression; we circle; we soar; we turn around; and at last back we come again” (“Phases of Fiction” 92). As if describing her own story, Woolf writes,
There is thus built up intermittently, irregularly, an extraordinary portrait of a character—a character shown most often in a passive state sitting still, through the quick glancing eyes of an erratic observer, who never lets his character speak more than a few words or take more than a few steps in his proper person, but is forever circling around and playing with the lapels of his coat and peering up into his face and teasing him affectionately. (92-3)

The departure from Pater occurs at “the critical moment” when “the author obliterates himself and gives the characters that little extra push which frees them from his tutelage so that they are something more than the whims and fancies of a brilliant brain” (93). Sterne achieves the balance of aesthetic artistry (“in no other book are characters so closely dependent on the author”) and paradoxical self-effacement (“character is largely made up of surroundings and circumstances”) and, finally, attention to the reader as creator: “In no other book are the writer and reader so involved together. So, finally, we get a book in which all the usual conventions are consumed and yet no ruin or catastrophe comes to pass; the whole subsists complete by itself” (93). The “personality” which domineers James’s work and petrifies Pater’s is overcome by the invitation offered to the reader in Sterne’s “little extra push,” and a new direction in fiction is achieved, “poetry in some novel”: “Sterne by the beauty of his style has let us pass beyond the range of personality into a world which is not altogether the world of fiction. It is above” (92-3; emphasis added).

In “The Modern Essay,” Woolf critiques her contemporaries in the twenties who lack the necessary fusion of composer, audience, and composition created by the refining flame of Pater’s art—“all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (Renaissance 55). Nonetheless, one condition of music that her experiments in lyric narrative must attend to, and perhaps the most fraught, is cultivating an active audience.
Woolf notes the mentor-student relationship that “good” writing exercises: it “must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out” (50).

Here Woolf takes up this ready meta-fictional metaphor in order to twist the metaphor of fabric from its representation of aesthetic solipsism to a representation of the fabric of subjectivity, including not only artist in relation to character but also artist and character in relation to the common reader. A recognition of the reciprocity of any act of meaning-making underwrites this shift in metaphor. Woolf’s twist on the trope of the curtain belies the falseness of any understanding of the other or the narrative’s figural mind as “transparent” (that is, a perfectly true, whole understanding). The desirable success marked by the metaphor of “draw[ing] the curtain round us” points to the contingency of the sense of transparency; only by the embeddedness of vision in the common life, which is achieved by drawing the reader/other into sympathy with the artist, is such a sense possible.

Woolf’s diary in 1925 includes a section of sub-headed, brief, aesthetic meditations leading up to her idea for “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” which register the key challenges her theory of art faced and suggest the centrality of these concerns in the story. She first reflects upon language and interiority: “the process of language is slow & deluding. One must stop to find a word; then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it” (D 3:102). Pater similarly writes, “our faculty of thinking is limited by our command of speech,” and the individual is realized in the weave of our “common ideas,
without which, in fact, we none of us could think at all” (Plato 142, 168).\textsuperscript{56} A reflection on intersubjectivity, drawn from an experience of meeting two young women tramping on the road, next suggests Woolf’s negotiation of the dialectic of individuality and the common life described in Pater’s mediation: “[m]y instinct at once throws up a screen, which condemns them […]. But all this is a great mistake. These screens shut me out. Have no screens, for screens are made out of our own integument; & get at the thing itself.” However, “If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies, we might, perhaps, dissolve utterly […]. But the screens are in the excess, not the sympathy” (D 3: 104). Pater similarly creates an image of “that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced” in order to put into relief the artist’s task in making that wall apparent (Renaissance 235). Following her weighing of the functions of screens and an acknowledgement of the writer’s “suggestive power” “to make images,” Woolf theorizes the relation of the narrative fabric of daily life (“dailiness”) and the lyrical image in “The Married Relation”:

Life—say 4 days out of 7—becomes automatic; but on the 5\textsuperscript{th} day a bead of sensation (between husband & wife) forms, wh. is all the fuller & more sensitive because of the automatic customary unconscious days on either side. That is to say the year is marked by moments of great intensity. Hardy’s ‘moments of vision’” (D 3: 105)

Like Proust, Woolf describes the “automatic” life of habit as the necessary backdrop to a moment in which a creative vision and sense of being together coalesces and emerges;

\textsuperscript{56} In Plato and Platonism, Pater is at the forefront of the modernist “inward turn.” Pater reads Plato’s words, “that inward dialogue, which is the ‘active principle’ of the dialectic method as an instrument for the attainment of the truth”; “the essential, or dynamic, dialogue, is ever that dialogue of the mind with itself” one “challeng[ing] us straightway to larger and finer apprehension of the processes of our own minds” (142-3).
particularly striking in this passage is Woolf’s use of Hardy’s term. Unlike the “moments of vision” of Hardy’s poetry, Woolf’s moment is one that is created and shared between two people—and perhaps better expressed in her “moments of being.” Thus the tension of dialectical vision is the ground for the emergence of the moment of being.

In surveying this recurrent trope (fabric of being, lyric accumulation and twist, sense of transparency) in Woolf’s literary criticism and diary reflections, I attempt to secure the nodal points for reading “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” For Pater, “we think through our rhetoric,” through what he calls “our under-texture” that is “part of our ‘very structure’”; however, the “belatedness of all writing” can be seen as the artist’s boon since it is in the “second flowering,” after perception has passed and re-cognition has refined the experience according to the subject’s sense of a pattern that the artist produces and uses to crystallize the moment of vision (Meisel 146-47).57 Whereas criticism and diary allow Woolf to theorize the importance of this process for the direction of fiction and to insist on resistance to stasis, the medium of her fiction allows her to perform it and invite her audience as participants in such flights of the mind.

“A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf’s 1939 memoir piece, describes the paradox of human description by recording her process of attempting to transfix her sense of self by recording her earliest “moments of being” that “were however embedded in many more moments of non-being” (70). The self is here the semi-transparent envelope of consciousness that orients its sense of being according to its “relation to certain

---

57 Pater’s formulation is also key to H.D., whose character Raymonde Ransome enacts this pattern and comments on the “second flowering” in both a cultural and personal aesthetic in “Murex” in Palimpsest.
background rods or conceptions,” a “pattern” for Woolf in the “cotton wool” (73). Against this common fabric, which is nonetheless patterned or structured by manifold flows of influence and discourses, the “things we have felt with great intensity” shine out in their difference from the common wool as nodal points or constellations of distinctive subjectivity (even if the pattern has determined which moment will be responded to with intensity) (67). The influences that affect the pattern, such as the consciousness of others, are “all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us” and thus keep one “in position”; it is precisely the magnetism of these multiple influences which Woolf finds unanalyzed “in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading” (80).58 The tentativeness of self, “that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves,” is indeed the place at which “analysis leaves off” (Pater, Renaissance 113), and the place at which Woolf takes up the pen and the lyric mode.

2.9 Catching Light and Heat

The lyric form allows Woolf to balance art and life, negotiate solipsism and the formulas of easy sympathy. To return to the “The Art of Fiction,” Woolf challenges both reader/critic and artist to screw up their courage and “cut adrift from the eternal tea-table and the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure” (55). The result, “the story might wobble; the plot might crumble;

58 Pater writes of these same forces, writing of Hardy, “It is rather a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world” (Renaissance 231). Both Woolf’s and H.D.’s representations of that magnetic system also evoke a feminist critique; we are led to ask, who is kept “in position” and how and do all benefit?
ruin might seize upon the characters” carries as triumphantly anarchic a tone as is echoed in the toppling masonry of *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* and in Lily’s final brush stroke in *To the Lighthouse* (55). The detection of a “wobble,” a prelude to the ruins of conventional novelistic linear space and time, enables a deconstruction and reappropriation of terms: “The novel, in short, might become a work of art” (55).

The double voicing of the second to last paragraph of “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” underscores the relationship of the implied author and Fanny’s vision and suggests a discernable “wobble.” An examination of the wobble at this story’s conclusion will show that Woolf’s cutting adrift from narrative into lyric is a move both modernist and feminist. The story’s penultimate paragraph is particularly interesting for the change from its appearance in *The Forum* to *A Haunted House*. In both publications, the paragraph follows the final incomplete sentence of the previous “She saw Julia—” (63, 111). However, in the *The Forum*, the next paragraph appears: “She saw Julia open her arms; saw her blaze; saw her kindle. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her” (63). The short story collection includes significant changes: “Julia blazed. Julia kindled. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia opened her arms. Julia kissed her on the lips. Julia possessed it” (111). In both, the metaphor of a “dead white star” is a great imaginative improvement for Fanny in aesthetically grasping Julia as compared to her earlier visions of Julia—her “driving look” seems to say “Stars, sun, moon” (104). The passage’s “possessed her/it” underscores the progression of Fanny’s imaginative power to create this moment of accord in their visions. Further, the passage’s double voicing creates a simultaneity of vision of implied author and implied reader.
The second passage, disencumbered by the tags of free indirect speech “she saw,” and changing the report of the action from a vague “Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her” to the more precise gesture of opened arms, the placement of the on her lips, and then the change from “possessed her” to “possessed it” achieves two things. First, the second passage emphasizes the double voicing; the voice of Fanny seeing Julia as a “dead white star” harmonizes with the artistry of the implied author by reducing the distance further by removing the emphasis on Fanny’s vision. Second, the three sentences that follow beginning with “Julia” more precisely express the double movements of the story: now that Fanny has mastered the art of seeing (possessing) Julia, Julia has mastered her role as mentor; now that the ideal reader has come to this moment of vision and recognizes the power of the implied author’s vision, the implied author has mastered her maieutic role as a writer pushing the boundaries of modern fiction. The “it” that is ultimately possessed, then, signifies not only Julia’s possession of Fanny as beloved, not only Julia’s and Fanny’s possession of beauty in their simultaneous moments of being, but also the reader’s and writer’s possession of that same beauty in creating that moment.

The “moment” of “ecstasy” is a four-voice coda; Fanny, Julia, the implied author, and implied reader. The compounded pleasure of the implied reader comes from the non-presence the implied author achieves by allowing the reader to feel with Julia and Fanny while also seeing the pattern in which the moment is embedded; Woolf here gives her readers and “her characters that little extra push which frees them” (“Phases of Fiction” 93). It has been, then, a double fugue from beginning until the end, in which the second subject is the relatively subdued call of implied author to the reader—that is, until the last lines of the story, when the reader is encouraged to take up an answer to the first subject’s
theme. The ambiguities, stabilized tensions, that produce the ecstasy of the final moment empower the implied reader to take up the theme and begin imagining and unraveling his or her own response. The density of imagery in “dead white star” is as seductively suggestive a thought as “the last chord of a Bach fugue” in evoking Woolf’s selection of a metaphor for her work to master and collapse the conventions of the novel (111, 103).

The white dwarf star was the first type of collapsed stars to be discovered, and its discovery came from the detection of a “wobble” in the orbit of Sirius and Sirius B (Tucker 125). In the 1920s, the emergence of quantum mechanics enabled astronomers to describe the relationship of Sirius and its companion star Sirius B; the gravitational force of a collapsing star (a white dwarf) may create a binary element of two stars, in which the greater dead white star contracts until its inner core is exposed while it accretes matter from the companion star which it has drawn into its orbit and with which it then remains in synchronous rotation (Tucker 126-27). The debate regarding the relationship of stellar bodies in binary systems was particularly high in the early 1920s as astronomers sought to understand which star fed on the energy of the other to create its magnetic tension. During this period the metaphor of binary stars appears prominently in the works of D.H. Lawrence (as a problematized ideal of love between Ursula and Birkin in

59 Contemporary Woolf critics have tapped the influence of astronomy and mathematics in her work; Jane Goldman has written on the eclipse as a recurrent trope in her work and Sue Sun Yon has theorized the relationship of “the wave-particle duality and other associated characteristics of light posited in the mid-1920s” in the texts Woolf was developing at that period (145). Holly Henry’s *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* “offers an investigation of the interconnections between modernist British fiction and a pervasive popular interest in astronomy in the 1920s in Britain and in the U.S.” (2).
Women in Love) and in several of H.D.’s lyric narratives (as an ideal of love between women).  

In H.D.’s HERmione, this image of binary stars first appears in what Her calls her “moment” with Fayne as they gaze into each others’ eyes and seem to be stars caught in synchronous orbit. Unlike Woolf’s Julia and Fanny, however, H.D.’s narrator offers enough of each character’s viewpoint (Fayne’s dialogue and Her’s interior discourse) to offer a biting satire of the (male) active/passive muse tradition. Both women figure the other as the star that they draw light and heat from (105-6); however, whereas Fayne laughs at Her’s naïve innocence, Her struggles to retain her illusion of Fayne’s role in sparking her aesthetic “incandescence” (218). Her tells Fayne, “you make me see the transience in everything” (145), a characteristic statement that prompts a sneering, dramatic reply from Fayne. Nonetheless, after her illness and talking cure, Her transposes her damaging relationship of romantic thralldom with Fayne into a productive (for Her) relationship of writer to muse so that Fayne then reflects Her’s identity as a writer. Walking alone in the snow, “Her’s feet [a] narrow black crayon across the winter whiteness” (223), Her’s thoughts return to her memory of the moment with Fayne: “When she said Fayne a white hand took Her. Her was held like a star invisible in daylight that suddenly by some shift adjustment of phosphorescent values comes quite clear. Her saw Her as a star shining white against winter daylight” (225). Only after Fayne has been sublimated into Her’s creative consciousness as a moment of vision is Her (to echo Woolf’s story) transfixed for a moment, a moment in which Her’s self

---

60 H.D.’s library, like Woolf’s, included Sir James Jeans’s summaries of contemporary science: The Stars in Their Courses and The Mysterious Universe.
becomes visible to Her. Both H.D. and Woolf use transparency to describe this moment of vision. Woolf’s Julia, a star against a purple night, seems “transparent” to Fanny who seems to see “through her,” and H.D.’s Her, seeing from a distance her moment with Fayne “held like a star invisible in daylight,” sees her self as “a star shining white against winter daylight.” In both scenes, the self-reflexive writing and the dissociation of the character from the moment in which she is embedded, pulls the reader in and out of the narrative. Within the narrative, the lyric moment matters intensely, yet simultaneously the author manages to question its significance by drawing attention to our collective and individual “making up” in both the mimetic and synthetic dimensions.

Woolf’s use of the term “wobble”—as the path of a binary star and as a deviation from conventional narrative—forms an interesting string of attachments. Woolf’s anarchic praise of the modern writer who would relinquish old formulas employs the phrase: “the story might wobble; the plot might crumble” (“Art of Fiction” 55), as does her diary and fiction with enough frequency that critic Melba Cuddy-Keane uses the term to describe Woolf’s “trope of the twist” and use of “the dialogic, or double-voice discourse” (“Rhetoric of Feminist Conversation” 137-8). The characteristic structure of Woolf’s essay (and I would add Woolf’s short fiction and The Waves) begins with a statement of conventional givens or beliefs, then “enacts a series of shifts, twists, and reversals that serve first to modify, then to question, and finally to undo the initial ordering” (Cuddy-Keane 141). The binary as oppositional is dissolved, as the dialectic’s effect is rather “to hold these apparent opposites” such as knowing and not knowing “in an ironic tension” (Cuddy-Keane 143). This strategy enables a polyphony of readings: “whatever their differences, all careful readers would perceive a wobble—a significant
premonition that this article [or story] will not proceed in a straightforward way,” and this allows Woolf to balance her presence as author “with scripting a negotiable role for the other to play” (Cuddy-Keane 149). Similar to the restatement of a subject in the final chords of a fugue, the “wobble” underlying the final paragraphs of “Slater’s Pins Have no Points” posits a variety of “different levels” for her readers to go forward, “flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted” (BTA 220). These different levels are nonetheless “in an ironic tension” with the “self-assertion” of the implied Woolf that has composed the piece (Cuddy-Keane 143).

The lyric narrative of the story turns upon the tensions of mimetic and synthetic binary systems (Fanny and Julia, and implied author and reader) “turning ceaselessly one within another” (“Kew Gardens” 36). The story’s formal progression, culminating in this tension, thus mirrors the experience of its character Fanny, “transfixed for a moment” (103). The ambiguous double voicing of Woolf’s paragraph trans-fixes the implied reader, who is held in a moment of reflection, but pushed toward imaginative creation. Although I depart from James Hafley’s formalist reading, he usefully notes that Julia’s restatement of the theme at its conclusion suggests that “the end of Fanny’s fugue becomes the opening measure of any other person’s” in its mirroring of the opening exposition (140). I would add to Hafley’s observation that the double-edged quality of this realization is that the reader is open to develop the possibilities the theme suggests, but the reader is also granted the realization that the notion of finally resolving any theme is futile: the coda opens up into endless variation, combination, and possibility.
Just as Fanny “catches light and heat” from Julia as muse and mentor, Woolf leaves her art open for her readers—which I model here in unraveling variations from Woolf’s line “dead white star” (111). This tension, central to Woolf’s lyric narrative, leads not to completion but an opening out, a reading that is palimpsestic in its layers as well as its availability for another level of writing. Woolf introduces in the final episode a stellar image with a meaning as variable as the standpoint of the reader/star-gazer on a particular night. If the reader is to pursue possible readings of “dead white star” by merely considering Woolf’s own context, a number of possibilities arise: Woolf’s relationship to Jane Harrison whose work suggests sources for her mythological allusions, Woolf’s Paterian use of “white” to signify an impersonal ideal in the artist, or the impact Woolf felt after seeing an eclipse.

To pursue the latter: in a letter dated June 24, 1927, Woolf entreats Vita Sackville-West to come on Tuesday, which she’s been “saving up for,” writing only a little and resting: “I wanted to ask you to dine, but Leonard thinks I shall then get excited, and start the Eclipse with a headache” (L 3:3 95). Having managed her forces adroitly, they travel together to Yorkshire to witness the total eclipse of the sun on June 29th. Just over a week later, Woolf writes Vita that she has “just written, or re-written” “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” (L 3: 397). Woolf makes a “sketch” of the experience of the eclipse in her diary, suggesting notes for a published article, which conveys the powerful

61 In his preface to The Renaissance, Pater writes that “[t]he heat of genius, entering into the substance of his work, has crystallized a part, but only a part, of it” and it is the heat of genius “drawing strength and colour and character from local influences” that is as equally essential as its company with “artists and philosophers” that “catch light and heat from each other’s thoughts” that leads to the crystallized moment of genius (xxxi-xxxiii).
impression it makes upon all there: she describes Vita on the train ride as “Sappho by Leighton,” and emphasizes the group’s shared experience in her depiction of the event. After “[t]he moments were passing” and they feel cheated:

we kept saying this is the shadow; & we thought now it is over—this is the shadow when suddenly the light went out. We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead. That was the astonishing moment: & the next when as if a ball had rebounded, the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparky aetherial colour & so the light came back. (D 3: 142-43)

In the context of Woolf’s oeuvre, the fundamentals of this scene are uncannily similar: two women, whose characters are different but complementary, finally connect in a moment associated with parallactic vision, star or moon gazing, and music. In Night and Day (1919), Mary and Katharine’s near connection in the light of the moon is interrupted by Ralph, and not only is this scene repeated with variations throughout the novel where Mary becomes to Katherine “a flame blazing suddenly in the dark” (236), but it also reappears six years later in Mrs. Dalloway in Clarissa Dalloway’s memory. Clarissa’s retrospective arrangement of the epiphanic moment when Sally had “kissed her on the lips” on the terrace where they walked as “Peter Walsh and Joseph Breitkopf went on about Wagner,” describes an experience “infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!—when old Joseph and Peter faced them: ‘Star gazing?’ said Peter” (53). Only in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” does the scene end without the intrusion of a male figure.62 It is after publishing this story that Woolf writes

62 In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce’s narrated monologue interestingly parallels the themes stated here. Stephen’s struggle in adolescence to forge an identity counter to the mold of his literal and literary fathers is evoked in images of “the barren shell of the moon”: “Art thou pale for weariness/ Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth/ Wandering
Orlando and states baldly but with palliative humor the correlation between narrative conventions and the common fabric of lived reality in *A Room of One’s Own*: “‘Chloe liked Olivia…’ Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen” (82).

Having unraveled these threads, I have come to Sapphism once again. Indeed, the three examples of possible contexts for reading “dead white star” given above may each be mapped along the vertical narrative axis of “Sapphism”: Jane Harrison, a possible model for Julia Craye, spent her later years living with Hope Mirrlees in Bloomsbury and was a mentor to Woolf; Pater’s “white light” of aestheticism (*Appreciations* 57) is twisted by Woolf out of the male domain of the “pale star of the Bugger” (*D* 3: 10) into the incandescent light of the “androgynous” mind in *A Room of One’s Own* (98); and in Woolf’s rewriting of the event in her diary and her fiction the eclipse becomes a backdrop for a connection between two women. Whereas writers such as Wyndham Lewis and D.H. Lawrence repudiate the androgyny of the creative individual in the later twenties, Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts script a re-cognition and celebration of the potential of the androgynous individual that is symbolized in the stargazing of two women. Further,

companionless…?” (96). Stephen finds a transcendental solace in Shelley’s lyric and works a mathematical equation which becomes an artistic creation with a tail that unfolds like a fugue, as “eyes and stars” moving in an opening and closing rhythm which becomes the “vast cycle of starry life […] a distant music,” recalling Shelley’s fragment and moving his soul “outward and inward” into “cold darkness filled chaos” (103). Whereas the lyric moves Stephen to a “cold indifferent knowledge of himself” (103), Woolf’s rewriting of this (romantic) lyric image-plot (star/moon, music, unraveling the fugal tail) leads to a connection between women, rather than the male artist’s solitude.
their portraits of maturing female artists reveal that the ideal of the male (rather than female) androgynous mind has a privileged place in society.\textsuperscript{63}

That is not to say, however, that all roads lead to Sapphism. Indeed, one could map three other possible contexts for reading “dead white star.” First, for example, tracking Woolf’s careful reading of James Jeans, Holly Henry persuasively argues that the image “of distant stars, that evoked in Jeans and Eddington a more nihilistic response, proved productive for Woolf’s formulation of her narrative scoping strategies,” and Henry analyzes these “scoping strategies” as part of Woolf’s “antiwar argument” (147). Second, Ann Banfield also locates the imagery of stars with Woolf’s narrative strategy to create a depersonalized perspective: “Already emblematic of the plurality of things, the starry heavens become that of the inhuman perspective as well” (121). Banfield shows how, in Woolf’s work, the “unthinking things” such as stars or waves draw the thinking subjects “inevitably beyond the occupied perspectives” (122). That is, they draw the mind to the limits and beyond the limits of observation, to the something that forever escapes. Third, to approach metaphysics (the shared axis here) from literary rather than scientific allusions, one might pursue the question of a possible reference to the poem

\textsuperscript{63} In \textit{The Modern Androgyne Imagination: A Failed Sublime}, Lisa Rado discusses H.D. and Woolf (as well as Joyce, Faulkner, and others) and finally argues that androgynous models of the imagination ultimately fail because the idea of a individual creative mind failed (183). Allison M. Cummings, who contextualizes the feminist debate regarding women’s use of lyric, offers a context for the continuing appeal of Woolf’s concept of an androgynous imagination:

In various forms, feminists debate which project furthers or betters the status of women: defining woman and women’s experience through stories of gendered experience or undermining textual practices that define and delimit gender. Perhaps because many women feel allegiances to both of these positions, feminist theorists such as Ferguson, Nancy Miller, and Susan Friedman strive to reconcile or negotiate them. Within feminist thought, the search for the synthesizing ‘third term’ is on, with some reports of success through irony, paradox (both/and strategies), or mobile subjects that occupy different positions at different moments. (155).
“For Life I Had Never Cared Greatly” from Thomas Hardy’s *Moments of Vision*. In this poem, the poet, on a pilgrimage alone, describes a nihilistic world view, characterized by “[c]onditions of doubt,” that are ultimately not assuaged “[w]ith symphonies soft and sweet colour” (537:9-13). However, unable to reconcile himself to a life lived “aloofly,” the poet resumes a “pilgrimage”:

Anew I found nought to set eyes on,
When, lifting its hand,
It uncloaked a star. (16-20)

The star’s “beams burning from pole to horizon” become a visionary point and desired vision—indeed, it draws the thinking subject into unoccupied spaces, literal and abstract (22). Departing from the highways and walking across “hill and dale / […] Regarding the vision on high,” the poet is “re-illumed” (24-28).

Nonetheless, the above readings are not unrelated to a “Sapphic” reading. Just as Hardy’s poet parts from the established highway and pilgrimage to regard “the vision on high,” Woolf’s use of star imagery marks a departure from narrative conventions and hetero-normative plots. What is necessary is to see how the “Sapphic” axis of “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” is aligned to Woolf’s lyric narrative innovation and the metaphysical turn that such a departure from narrative and social convention enables. Current criticism of the story, separated into lesbian readings and formalist readings, cannot attend to the complex aesthetic and political harmonies of the text. Woolf, writing to Janet Case in September 1925, argues for not separating style and content in a critical reading: “I don’t believe you can possibly separate expression from thought in an imaginative work. The better a thing is expressed, the more completely it is thought. […] I don’t see how you can enjoy technique apart from the matter” (*L* 3: 201).
In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” the fugue-like form of its nested image-plots, which develop the meta-fictional metaphors of fabric and transparency, expresses and recreates in its final lyric moment a productive tension. This tension pivots around the questions of knowability and subjectivity the story’s dynamics have evoked. Subjectivity and knowledge are transfixed for a moment, allowing us to see that each are processes. If these processes are usually “transparent,” then the story makes apparent the reciprocal systems influencing each: the influence of and resistance to social norms in a patriarchal society, the narrow range of categories that pin or fail to pin a woman’s identity in that society, and the limits or potentials of a culture’s given languages and narratives for expressing the elusive matter of the subject or knowledge. Not only does the binary system of the characters Julia and Fanny lead the reader to examine these processes, but the binary system forged between author and reader does as well. In a text that foregrounds the synthetic narrative dimension, the implied Woolf becomes most apparent (or apparently absent), when the implied reader reaches “All seemed transparent, for a moment, to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot” (110).

To return, then, to a reading of the meta-fictional metaphors of the story, and to attempt a reading of these images that weds “expression” and “thought” as Woolf argues: where is the “wobble” in Woolf’s use of the fabric and transparency dialectic in the story? In his reading of the characters and the image of the window, Hafley argues that Fanny’s vision as much constructs as perceives the pane of glass separating the Crayes from the world and elusive “beauty.” A necessary addition to Hafley’s reading is that Fanny does not desire to stand on the same side of the glass with Julia, which would perpetuate the solipsism her brother represented. Rather, and counter to Clements’s and
Winston’s narrative of a misrecognition of lesbian identity, Fanny desires from the story’s opening lines to assist Julia in breaking that glass. Fanny delights in situating herself as the object of desire and beauty that prompts Julia to depart from conventional lines (what is expected—whether in spoken discourse, daily habits, or life choices) in order to grasp and possess her. Fanny thus is shown “reading” Julia’s playing of the Bach fugue (“beautifully as a reward to a favourite pupil”) as an invitation, and her composition of Julia’s character in her nested episodes of imagined scenes is an affirmative, mimetic, answer (105).

While we cannot state absolutely that Fanny’s vision has rightly judged Julia’s desire and her quest, the themes Fanny elaborates her portrait of Julia from (privileged as quoted dialogue) suggest that Julia’s character and her behavior toward Fanny harmonizes with Fanny’s composition. The reader, given Julia’s “real” presence at the beginning and end of the story, contextualizes Fanny’s sense of triumph (in finally understanding, seeing, and possessing a vision of Julia Craye) with Julia’s role as model and mentor that Fanny enjoys pleasing. The pin lost and regained fixes the recognized moment in the shared fabric—the story’s and Fanny’s imagination’s fugue-like form—as a result of the movement of these two consciousness toward one another and the underpinning of the similar movement of the reader and subtle implied author. In reading the simultaneous moments of being that Julia and Fanny experience at the end, the reader’s sense of triumph results from having reconstructed Woolf’s fugue-like composition that seems to net Julia’s character as well as Fanny’s, and from recognizing the interweaving of desire in the call and answer of voices with which the composition strings its net. The ambiguity of the moment of possession, whether it can be said that
Julia, Fanny, or the reader possesses an understanding of the other or is possessed in crafting or appreciating beauty itself, is the absent point Woolf draws readers to contemplate.

The fugue, I have argued, functions as the fabric of the text, a metaphor (like the images that accumulate meanings and are then re-cognized in Woolf’s lyric) that the story subtly guides the reader in understanding. The pattern of the fugue is not of a curtain that divides author and reader or character and object, nor is it a curtain that shuts in a privileged audience by concealing a hidden subtext. Rather, and this is Woolf’s subversive twist, the fugue is to function as the “semi-transparent envelope”; it is the common fabric which places in relief (makes visible by its difference) but also creates (weaves the subject and trains perception) the epiphanic moment. Like the “dark” in the story, the fugue is paradoxically a cloak flung out as well as the depth of empty space (106, 110). Fanny foreshadows this final vision of Julia in story-time. Earlier in the story, searching for the pin, “She had in mind how one evening when the lesson had lasted longer than usual and it was dark, Julia Craye had said ‘it’s the use of men, surely, to protect us,’ smiling at her that same odd smile, as she stood fastening her cloak, which made her, like the flower, conscious to her finger tips of youth and brilliance” (106). This memory illuminates Fanny’s final vision after she has found and picked up the pin and “surprised [Julia] in a moment of ecstasy”:

She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple […]. Julia Craye, sitting hunched and compact holding her flower, seemed to emerge out of the London night, seemed to fling it like a cloak behind her, it seemed, in its bareness
and intensity, the effluence of her spirit, something she had made which surrounded her […] (110) 64

That H.D.’s text, written during the same period, should share such a similar scene is striking. Both texts narrate the process of seeing again, of recognizing formulated constructs of meaning (that love between women is unnatural, that a man bears the creative gaze and woman bears his gaze as a passive muse), and then revise those constructs in the narrator’s re-composing of the protagonist’s creative process of awakening and deconstruction. In both texts the inclusion of an authoritative yet self-effacing narrator creates an effect of the text “opening out,” as Forster writes of the symphonic text, toward the reader—but sounding a very different note. Whereas the presence of the narrator and implied author in Woolf’s text has the effect of drawing the reader into sympathy with the affirmative “moment of being” she has composed, the presence of a “wise” narrator and implied author (particularly given the text’s roman-a-clef status) in H.D.’s text has the effect of troubling the reader. Fayne’s presence reechoes the hysteric circling of the opening scene, suggesting that Her will habitually face these turns in the labyrinth whatever ideal alternative she spins with her creative, androgynous imagination.

64 In her 1920 essay, “The Wise Sappho,” H.D. redeems a too “purple” Asiatic Sappho, writing that “burning Sappho” burns not with any base passion, but with a Grecian fire like lightning, a “white, inhuman element […] as if the brittle crescent-moon gave heat to us” (57-8). Both Woolf and H.D. take up the imagery Sappho has used in her fragments—the purple cloak, roses, and white star—in order to make this female lyric tradition useable to their moment. To do so requires reappropriating Sappho from a male tradition. In this essay, H.D. reflects on the need to wrest Sappho from a male tradition (particularly Meleager) and to write Sappho in both a poetic and a prosaic mode: she is “[a] song, a spirit, a white star that moves across the heaven to mark the end of a world epoch or to presage some coming glory,” and “[y]et she is embodied—terribly a human being, a woman, a personality” (59).
In contrast, the deconstructive move of Woolf’s text is particularly poignant, since in finally exposing the limits and falsity of ever truly “seeing” an other and thus possessing that other, the text manages nonetheless to seduce the reader to continue the attempt, to accept the invitation to the attempt to see an other, to grasp the ever elusive matter of beauty and subjectivity. The implied reader experiences the same climactic triumph of mastery in following the progression of the composition of Fanny’s vision by also realizing at the same time the limitations of Fanny’s vision. The implied reader can revel in the moments of being and at the same time recognize the voice of the implied author suggesting that the poignancy of those moments is founded foremost on the moments of non-being, the cotton wool or patterning of daily life and conventional fiction (“A Sketch of the Past” 70-3). I would further argue that the implied reader ends the story with a sense of ascendancy, a willingness and joy in pursuing the paradox, particularly as a result of the implied Woolf’s ability to reveal in the course of the text that she has called to the implied reader as to a beloved, the “favourite pupil” (105). Thus, the implied reader is embraced by the final lines, caught in a synchronous orbit.

To return, then, to judging the practical success of Woolf’s story according to the axis she has defined in her own theory; is Woolf’s story successful if, as my challenge to Hafley’s and Clements’s readings suggest, I must argue for a broadened understanding of the story? Like Fanny, I say, “yes.” Woolf succeeds precisely because Woolf’s ideal reader is an active reader. As readers who then write, each engages with the text precisely from a feeling that he or she is the implied Woolf’s ideal reader, the beloved the text posits who will come with the vision that can “see” the text rightly. Woolf’s call for a new direction for narrative is thus nearly always already consummated in this lyric
romance—between the implied author and ideal reader—and whatever the departures
critics take, they answer the call in the affirmative, since it is ultimately the reader’s
engagement that the text desires. Don’t you always find that?
CHAPTER 3

THE PALIMPSESTUOUS TEXT

3.1 H.D.’s Lyric Narrative in Palimpsest

The development and expansion of a fugue-like writing in the late 1920s provided writers such as Virginia Woolf and H.D. with a means to depart from conventional narrative form and content. Approximating effects of music, these texts demand active audiences, emphasize vertical as much as linear development, and explore the boundaries of what can be expressed in language. Although Woolf’s work will continue to be a point of comparison, particularly her novels To the Lighthouse (1927) and The Waves (1931), this chapter focuses on H.D.’s development of lyric narrative. Although H.D. is best known as an imagist poet, in the 1920s, she turned from lyric poetry to lyric narrative in prose. With lyric narrative prose, H.D. could explore the psychoanalytic and poetic apparatuses, the artist working at art in and of modernity, and the role of art in reflecting history and formulating an ethical standpoint. H.D.’s prose has been critiqued as a turn away from contingent history toward the timeless aesthetics of lyric, primarily by studies that reduce her novels to autobiography. However, Palimpsest, like much of
H.D.’s prose, requires readers to examine the limits of aesthetic solipsism and to question the role of the avant-garde in a history of recurring war.

The central story of H.D.’s three-part novel *Palimpsest* (1926), “Murex: War and Postwar London,” particularly deserves reexamination as a text about the work of art in understanding one’s relation to history and the effects of trauma. While the palimpsestic structure of H.D.’s trans-historical novel suggests a comparison to Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (1927-40), his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) provides a useful opening comparative frame for reading the narrative innovation of H.D.’s *Palimpsest*. Howard Caygill, in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, identifies three perspectives put forward by Benjamin in this essay. First, the work of art is regarded “as a site for experimentation and the invention of new modes of experience”; second, the work is presented as “an occasion for tactile critical enjoyment by analogy with architecture”; and third, the work of art is viewed as “a form of cathartic inoculation against the psychotic development of the energies generated by technology” (Caygill 114).

H.D.’s self-reflexive “Murex” also examines these functions of the work of art, particularly the avant-garde work in the arena of literature. The first function—evocative of Pater—might be described as the avant-garde’s work of expanding consciousness, a function that H.D.’s poet-character sees as both personal and cultural work. Although Benjamin’s second function of “tactile critical enjoyment” given in his discussion of architecture may seem irrelevant to H.D.’s text, her novel’s unique structure—its palimpsest layering of intertexts—reveals an analysis analogous to Benjamin’s of the interface of artwork and audience. The third function, an inoculation against the
psychosis of modernity administered via a dose of the new technologies of modernity, is a potential function which Benjamin examines in light of the mass movements of communism and fascism. This function is particularly relevant to H.D.’s “Murex” in that her protagonist critically examines the idea that the avant-garde artwork has the potential, by utilizing and adapting the most recent technologies, to inoculate a culture against the “destructiveness of war” (Benjamin, “Work” 242). The technologies that H.D.’s text employs include the mapping of the psychic apparatus via the new science of psychoanalysis, particularly Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and the reproducing technologies revolutionizing aural and visual arts, the gramophone and cinematograph.

In reading H.D.’s construction of “Murex” “as a site for experimentation and the invention of new modes of experience” (Caygill 114) it is necessary to recognize that the text, while difficult, is not intended as merely a coterie piece. By failing to distinguish between the author H.D., her narrator, and her character (who is a poet), autobiographical readings of the novel¹ have missed its self-critique and ambivalent theorization of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis and writing as apparatuses to process and confront crises of modernity. H.D.’s tension of mimetic (at the level of story) and synthetic (the relationship of implied author and reader) dimensions makes possible Palimpsest’s contemplation and critique of the artist and art’s role in history. H.D. turned to the dialectical vision lyric narrative makes possible in order to resist the limited

¹ Deborah Kelly Kloepfer’s analysis of “Murex,” for example, follows the traditional reading of the text as an autobiographical, therapeutic exercise. Despite arguing that Palimpsest “does not signal that it should be read as autobiography,” Susan Stanford Friedman also approaches the text as “a palimpsest of its author’s psyche” (Penelope’s Web 238).
range of her earlier imagist lyrics and the label of coterie poet. H.D. had realized, even before the First World War, a need and a desire to move beyond the imagist lyric. Demonstrating that the “split” and “symbiosis” between “poetry and prose” was essential to the formation of her modernism, H.D. reflects on her writing poetry and prose simultaneously during the same period as she wrote *Palimpsest* in *Compassionate Friendship* (qtd. in *Penelope’s Web* 5). H.D. uses the same metaphor that Woolf uses in her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art” to describe her working on prose at the same time as her poetry: “there is a bridge needed, but possibly if there had been the bridge I would have worked at neither. *Palimpsest* is what I am thinking of, published in 1926, Paris. I must have been working on the two, the poetry and the prose, about the same time” (qtd. in *Penelope’s Web* 5).

Like Woolf, H.D. recognized the need for her art to keep in touch with the flux of life and to avoid the frozen sprays that the Paterian moment can create in isolation from narrative. Whereas Woolf achieves this lyric narrative dialectic in *The Waves* by juxtaposing impersonal interludes with the lyric utterances of her characters over the narrative of their life spans, H.D. achieves this dialectical movement in *Palimpsest* by writing a triptych of stories that span “War Rome,” “Postwar London,” and “Excavator’s

---

2 Further support for a reading of the critical distance between the implied author and the poet character in “Murex” is H.D.’s own reflection on her maturation as a writer. According to Friedman, “The nonnarrative, dislocated space and time of her Sea Garden poems became the butt of ironic humor in her correspondence with Bryher,” as H.D. describes looking at the marbles in the Louvre to Bryher as “All very early H.D.” (April 5, 1936) (*Penelope’s Web* 53).

3 Friedman uses this phrase in her apt description of its structure: “The three stories acquire the status of novel as they are read backward and forward or viewed like a triptych in any and every direction. Repetitive images create a textual mesh that tenuously holds the three times and places in a single time-space of the author’s and reader’s consciousness” (*Penelope’s Web* 237-8).
In “Part Three,” “Secret Name: Excavator’s Egypt (circa A.D. 1925),” H.D.’s Helen Fairwood attempts to keep her balance “like a tightrope walker” by being within the flow of the prosaic while attuned and able to capture the poetic. She sees herself using these two “worlds, one at either end of some sort of slender balancing pole (her everyday self?) themselves serving to keep her firm, while step by step she must continue her difficult experiment, her prowl” (176). In each of the three parts of *Palimpsest*, H.D. depicts a woman writer or scholar who balances two “antagonistic worlds,” which, particularly in the first and last stories, includes the dialectics of the corporeal and the intellectual, rational and mystical, Roman and Athenian, Egyptian and Attic, and the two horses of the Platonic soul. The second story, “Murex,” focuses on the dialectics of the past and present, Christian and Jew, London and Cret-d’y-Vau, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, the social self and the poet, forgetting and remembering. The latter is particularly important to Raymonde Ransome, who, like Helen Fairwood, struggles to negotiate living (or not living) in the realms of poetic creation and prosaic reality.

This balancing act is also analogous to the “difficult experiment” the implied H.D. pursues throughout the text. H.D. takes the reader on a tightrope walk between a lyric and narrative mode and positions readers to use the balancing pole of the text to enter into the experience of these suspended oppositions. Helen Fairwood’s trapeze act suggests the desired outcome of H.D.’s difficult experiment: “One foot. The other. The two worlds swaying precariously (swaying by their very opposites) swayed herself into this very perfect realization of herself” (177). The novel’s dialectics encourage readers to themselves balance opposites to achieve a more perfect realization of the self in their
historical moment. To paraphrase E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, H.D. manages to contemplate the self and the instrument of fiction in a new way, and in so doing she leads readers to contemplate the cyclic resonances of history, the institutions that reproduce war, and to question the role of art in the on-rush of history (172-23). Nonetheless, while the novel posits the poetic prose of “Murex” as the privileged site for critically contemplating experience in modernity, “Murex” simultaneously questions the efficacy of avant-garde writing as adequate to respond to the recurring crises of modernity.

I focus here on the central story, the balancing pole of *Palimpsest*, since it is the most self-reflexive and the story that echoes throughout H.D.’s prose work.4 “Part Two” of *Palimpsest*, “Murex: War and Postwar London (circa A.D. 1916-1926),” provides a converse perspective to Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” Although both Woolf’s and H.D.’s stories depict the progression of a character’s vision of an other, a process which allows the character to come in touch with an aspect of her own identity, the point of view of “Murex” is not of the young apprentice but that of the older woman.

Raymonde Ransome is a poet (Ray Bart) living alone in the “cocoon-blur” of London, who is visited one late afternoon by the twenty-nine year old Ermentrude Solomon (96). Ermy has been sent to Raymonde by their mutual friend Marion on the pretense of getting written introductions to people in Florence, where Ermy is about to escape. Ermy’s husband (Martin) has been lured into an affair by their friend Mavis Landour, and Ermy has learned (from Marion and Mavis) that Mavis had an affair with Raymonde’s

---

4 The fugue-like form (repetition plus variation) and content (a woman who finds a vision of her self in another woman) of this chapter are echoed most directly in H.D.’s unpublished short story “The Moment” and *HERmionie* (discussed in the previous chapter), both written during the late twenties.
(now absent) husband (Freddie) ten years ago. Despite this tangled web of intrigue, the story’s plot is fairly simple. A short summary reveals that the simplicity, or perhaps banality, of the plot facilitates a vertical, lyric emphasis. Readers are introduced to Raymonde’s mental drift and solitude which is interrupted by Marion’s phone call explaining that Ermy wants to see her; a second immediate call follows from Ermy requesting a visit; a brief period of waiting and reluctance precedes Ermy’s visit; Raymonde and Ermy have tea and converse; Ermy departs and Raymonde meditates in the twilight in the chair Ermy has left; Raymonde writes a poem, deciding finally to go to Cret-d’y-Vau where she “can get some work done” (138).

As is typical of lyric narrative, the story’s dynamics are primarily vertical. As H.D.’s narrator suggests, the romantic plots and affairs are rather a “ tiresome puzzle” (124), and the labyrinth of interest lies elsewhere—below the surface. The reader’s interest is in following Raymonde’s descent into the layers of her unconscious and the ascent of her creative powers. A pattern of theme, repetition, and variation is used throughout to depict Raymonde’s psychic fugue state; the progression of story-time and Raymonde’s conversation with Ermy is subordinate to Raymonde tearing through her self-imposed mental fog to finally process the events she has repressed for ten years. Her drive to unearth and face this buried past is triggered by images and phrases which Ermy brings to her during their conversation. When Ermy departs, the pattern of recurring theme and variation continues. However, here it depicts Raymonde’s creative process as she composes a poem, as well as Raymonde’s reflections on Ermy’s intervention, which she sees as inspiring her to reengage the creative identity buried nearly ten years ago.

The instability of the story seems initially to be a question of Raymonde’s relationship to
Ermy: how will the more experienced woman help or refuse to help Ermy? As Raymonde’s past is increasingly revealed to the reader, however, another tension (between implied author and reader) develops as the driving force of the narrative progression: will Raymonde awaken to the trauma of her past and thus the possibility of the (re)emergence of a powerful creative identity?

H.D. chooses a heterodiegetic narrator who uses primarily narrated monologue to voice one character’s vision (Raymonde’s) and whose distance from the implied author is difficult to distinguish.5 I have argued that, in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Woolf’s depiction of Fanny’s composition of a vision of Miss Craye calls upon readers to respond in embracing creative alternatives (both in art and life choices). In reading “Murex,” I argue that a similar mimetic function (Raymonde’s appropriation and projection of the other, Ermy) is meant to take place in the synthetic dimension between its implied author and audience. Just as Benjamin privileges architecture as “an occasion for tactile critical enjoyment” (Caygill 114), the structure of H.D.’s text is an occasion for critical enjoyment by the implied reader. The reader is called on to not only experience Raymonde’s psychological experience of breakthrough in writing a poem but also to participate in the narrator’s detached assessment of the character’s experience and resulting artwork. H.D.’s investment, in constructing an appeal to her audience by depicting Raymonde’s act of composition, is to break from the limitations that imagist poetry imposes, to contextualize that break, and to simultaneously show the poetic

5 Cohn notes that narrated monologue is the most complex of the techniques of the heterodiegetic narrator, since “like psycho-narration it maintains the third-person reference and the tense of narration, but like the quoted monologue it reproduces verbatim the character’s own mental language” (14).
potential of prose. In using intertexts as nodal points for her character’s poetic formulation, H.D. creates a topography for herself and the reader to assess the work of literary art in an epoch of world war.

H.D.’s story depicts Raymonde’s psychological breakthrough to her creative identity—enabled by the presence of Ermy—in order to provide a site for her postwar generation of readers to face the trauma of the past and to respond via the creative alternatives artists such as H.D. worked at in the late twenties. The implied author, in constructing this story, is to function as Ermy does for Raymonde, provoking readers’ memories and providing inspiration for a new direction to “carry on” (137). The second half of “Murex” includes Raymonde’s cycling thoughts about her traumatic wartime past, her concerns about the relationship of her generation and the younger generation of women, and her theorization of art’s relationship to modernity. Interspersed with these meditations are lines of a poem that she is composing; it is the juxtaposition of H.D.’s lyrical prose that depicts Raymonde’s internal monologue and the rather paltry poetry that is the product of Raymonde’s thoughts that offers a complex commentary on the form and substance needed to write one’s experience in modernity.

In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History, Cathy Caruth’s characterization of narratives of trauma offers a relevant frame for H.D.’s presentation of Raymonde overcoming the death drive in hearing her own buried story of trauma in Ermy’s recent similar distress. Drawing on Freud, Caruth writes that such narratives are often “the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (8). H.D.’s
story “Murex,” like Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), tells the story of an individual’s trauma awakened to in the encounter with an other; moreover, it carries on a story, a history of trauma, in its uncanny repetitions that must be read and awakened to in the future by subsequent generations of readers. Between its lines the reader is to find “not simply a reality that can be grasped in these words’ representation, but the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur” (Caruth 112). Thus, lyric narrative texts of trauma that might otherwise be dismissed as solipsistic—the *l’art pour l’art* that leads inevitably to war according to Benjamin (“Work” 224)—may deserve a reconsideration for their revelation of “not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an *ethical* relation to the real” (Caruth 92).

In “Murex,” the reader engages in a psychoanalytic “reading” of Raymonde’s repression and the relationship of that repression to the suppression of her creative identity. Read as a socio-historic symptom, as the text’s allusions prompt us to, H.D.’s Raymonde both embodies and decodes the shocks of modernity. I thus turn to both narratology and psychoanalysis in reconsidering *Palimpsest*’s emphasis on meta-textual metaphors, such as the many layered topographies of a palimpsest of consciousness. Gérard Genette’s analysis of intertextuality in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* and Susan Stanford Friedman’s analysis of the vertical axes of narrative dynamics (literary, historical, psychic) is particularly applicable to H.D.’s “Murex.”6

These topographical analyses of narrative dynamics have a precursor in Sigmund Freud’s

---

6 H.D.’s poet Raymonde serves a thematic function as a palimpsest for readers to examine the interconnections of the text’s vertical axes, “the literary, the historical, and the psychic,” and to see the lines of poetry they produce when Raymonde crafts her poem (Friedman, “Spatialization” 115).
topography of the dynamics of the psychic apparatus, specifically, his mapping of the primary and secondary signifying processes in relation to his theory of the unconscious and preconscious in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Like Freud, whose work “Murex” alludes to, H.D. makes visible (by creating topographies and images) the subject’s location in, and construction of, aesthetic and historical contexts. However, H.D.’s text moves beyond analytical representation; as in Walter Benjamin’s use of Freud’s models, her topographies of the psychic and poetic apparatuses have an ethical motive. The architecture of H.D.’s text attempts to draw readers into the traumatic experience itself (narrative’s “tactile” enjoyment in a state of “distraction”) while also providing a map of the experience of trauma for “critical” enjoyment (the distanced vantage of the lyric mode) (Caygill 114).

H.D.’s “Murex” places the process of the modernist writer’s hypertextuality at center stage, mapping how intertexts provide a structure for the poet Raymonde to fabricate “new things out of old” (Genette 398). Genette writes that the “duplicity of the object,” out of which “new things” are made, can be represented “in the sphere of textual relations […] by the old analogy of the palimpsest: on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through” (398-99). The epigraph definition of a palimpsest H.D. chooses for her novel, “a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another” (1), obscures the emphasis on the persistence of the previous texts and emphasizes the old text’s transformation into the new by the intervention of the author and subsequent reader. By allowing the reader to lay hands on the sense of the text via its palimpsest structure, H.D.’s lyric narrative text is more closely allied with the product of mechanical
reproducibility than with the auratic artwork. As a self-reflexive text, “Murex” depicts the transformation of texts, voices, and images that is the labor of Raymonde’s writing; as “a palimpsestuous” text, it impedes a linear plot progression to instead seduce readers to contemplate their own role as readers “in a relational reading” to not only *Palimpsest* but also to its many intertexts (Genette 399).

H.D.’s “Murex” inspires (in the reader) and models (in its poet-character) palimpsestuous reading as a new (taken from the old) way of perceiving not only literature but also a way of perceiving how the psychic and literary/signifying apparatuses overlay each other. Further, it attempts to show how the interplay of these apparatuses both constructs the subject and is manipulated by the subject topologically, that is, how topographies change in a particular socio-historical context over time. A palimpsestuous mode of reading shares with Walter Benjamin’s dialectical vision an emphasis on the productive tension of moving back and forth between levels of discourses. Benjamin’s “dialectics of seeing”7 evokes the questions of H.D.’s palimpsestuous text: what meanings does the reader make in reading the story and the “real” world, in reading its intertexts, and in reading these meanings in relation to future choices? Benjamin’s theorization of “seeing” has particular relevance here; his essay on “The Work of Art” theorizes the subject’s culturally constructed perceptual matrix in encountering the work of art, and Benjamin also analyzes the psychoanalytic and political implications of changes in the perceptual matrix in essays such as “On the Mimetic Faculty.”

7 Susan Buck-Morss uses “dialectics of seeing” to describe the philosophy of his *Arcades Project*: “the layers of historical data” and “debris of mass culture” that Benjamin has arranged, when seen with the “dialectical vision” he explicated, might lead to “philosophical truth” (ix). Benjamin would perhaps add “a” philosophical truth.
“Murex” stages Raymonde’s perceptual matrix; readers discover the works of art that provide structures for her (notably Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera*, Robert Browning’s “Popularity,” and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) and are drawn into Raymonde’s work of creating art in this matrix.

According to Freud, since the dream-work disregards an essential structuring device of the secondary process, binary opposition, its tendency is one of taking “things out of context (i.e. out of the linguistic, relational, and temporal organization of the preconscious) and putting them into an altogether different one (i.e. a context in which the criterion of representability figures centrally […])” (Silverman 98). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin transposes Freud’s topography of the individual unconscious and preconscious to a cultural level. By arranging layers of diverse texts (the dream-work of a culture, such as *Das Kapital* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*), Benjamin intends his palimpsest to serve as nodal points in a constellation that can flash a meaning to the reader who actively “reads” their connections in relation to their present moment.8 To Benjamin, the “dialectical image” is such a constellation of points from the past that is recognizable in a particular now of the reader’s present; the shock of recognition in making these connections contains a revolutionary charge. He writes in his 1935 expose of the project, “The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening”

8 In “The Interpretation of Dreams,” Freud describes manifest signifiers as having: “found their way into the content of the dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts, because, that is to say, they constituted ‘nodal points’ upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged, and because they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream” (IV: 283; emphasis added).
(Arcades V: 13). H.D.’s character Raymonde Ransome improves upon Freud’s model in the direction of Benjamin’s cultural analysis. First, Raymonde undergoes a personal awakening of repressed traumatic events when confronted with the correspondences that Ermy presents in her present situation. Second, Raymonde, as a poet in the course of waking up from the limbo of postwar London, connects the events of her life and Ermy’s life to larger cycles in history, finding correspondences between present, wartime, and prewar London and cycles of modernity since ancient times.

3.2 Psycho-analytic Progression and the Pleasure-principle: Woolf, Proust, H.D.

Both Freud’s model of the psychic apparatus and Benjamin’s model of his philosophy of historical awakening encourage a palimpsestuous mode of reading. H.D.’s Palimpsest likewise departs from linear narrative and privileges a kind of reading that moves backwards and forwards, prompting readers to trace connections and read their own constellation of “nodal points” (Freud IV: 283). For Kaja Silverman, such a mode of reading is the domain of cinema. Whereas the literary text is dominated by the secondary process (preconscious), the cinematic text is dominated by the primary process (unconscious): “Literature depends upon a medium which has been elaborated for the suppression of affect and the articulation of difference—i.e. language” (108). According to Silverman, the few literary texts that deliberately break language’s “paradigmatic and syntagmatic rules,” such as Finnegans Wake, paradoxically have the “effect of evoking the rules themselves” (108). However, the modernist project for authors such as H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin is to break the dominance of the secondary process (the hegemonic networks of social discourses that shape the subject), not in order to privilege the primary
process but to allow readers to realize the processes themselves. Discourse communities are not in themselves negative and indeed are necessary for the realization of the subject: the “cinematic text,” like the “writerly text” or self-reflexive literary text, enables the subject to reconsider the internalized and external networks of discourse shaping the self. As Jean-Louis Baudry writes in “The Apparatus,” Freud returns us to the site of Plato’s cave in order to allow us to “consider the apparatus” itself (760).

Woolf’s The Waves also prompts readers to consider the mimetic and psychoanalytic apparatuses in the development of its six characters’ subjectivities. Following the initial interlude which describes a view of the sun rising over the sea and a house and garden, the text’s exposition is like that of a fugue in which six voices each enter into the theme of dawning life. Woolf’s lyric, subjectless interlude and the lyric utterances of her six characters lead readers to question not only her textual apparatus (the poetic form of her composition), but also the human psychic apparatus. As each character gives a brief statement of a sensory perception, the reader questions how that statement of perception allows others to come to understand the subject that consolidates that perception into language. These images, whether abstract (“I see a globe”) or precise (“Look at the spider’s web”), recur throughout the novel’s episodes to mark characters’ subjective development and exemplify how identity, formed in relation to others, is an “unsubstantial territory” when “phrases” are shared (16). As the characters reflect on their development, they at times interpret the significance of phrases and remembered moments that they have carried with them since childhood. For example, Percival’s farewell dinner begins with a succession of brief phrases by the six characters, as in the opening exposition, but here it is a concise restatement in young adulthood of childhood
moments already fully described from the child’s point of view in the course of the novel (124-25). *The Waves* thus shows the transformation of latent and manifest content without pinning any image to a particular meaning; the text creates nodal points that require readers’ work of interpretation. Woolf’s text thus creates Barthes’s “ideal writerly text,” which is “not a structure of signifieds” but “a galaxy of signifiers” in which “meaning is never closed” (5-6).

What sets Woolf’s *The Waves* apart from her other works, as well as H.D.’s, is the absence of a directing narrator’s presence; the implied author instead seems to play the role of a conductor of the score her six voices have already created. Silverman writes that “metaphor and metonymy” move “back and forth” between “the two elements which they conjoin” as well as between “the primary and secondary processes,” operating to “find a kind of equilibrium, one which permits profound affinities and adjacencies to be discovered without differences being lost” (109, 110). Metaphor and metonymy also may serve to “create a dialectic of absence and presence” (Silverman 113). Benjamin identifies this shuttling of memory as Proust’s creation of a new narrative structure: it is “the *actus purus* of recollection itself, not the author or the plot, [that] constitutes the unity of the text” (“Proust” 203).

In Freud’s model of the psychic apparatus, this dialectic of absence and presence is fundamental. Displacement occurs as a result of the repression of affect or instinct at the unconscious level and its replacement at the preconscious level through condensation, a process which in its dialectic of absence and presence inaugurates desire. According to Silverman, Proust’s “Swann in Love” illustrates “the metaphors and metonymies which constitute the history of desire”; Odette, as a metonymic signifier for Swann, displaces
the affective intensity of the Botticelli fresco and the musical phrase of Vinteul’s sonata, and thus Odette “inherits their affective intensity” (Silverman 115-16). Swann’s expertise on the operations of desire, the narcissistic desire for the ideal and the elaboration of displacements that increase desire, gives him the ability “to manipulate events on his behalf—to create ever new metaphoric and metonymic alliances” (Silverman 116). It is this recognition and mastery of the apparatus that serves Swann’s poetic power. Likewise, Fanny mastering the combinations modeled by Miss Craye in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” has found a pleasure in the creative process that intensifies her moment with Miss Craye. Raymonde, mastering the psychic apparatus in abreacting her experiences through her projected vision of Ermy, also finds a release in her poetic identity and is able to further displace her desires into the space of her poem.

Woolf and H.D., following Proust, do not confine this mastery of the dialectic of presence and absence and the apparatus of desire to the mimetic dimension (the characters within the story world). It is attempted in the synthetic dimension as well; the presence and absence of the implied author is balanced in order to push readers to take up the pleasurable mastery of the interpretive and creative processes.

In “Murex,” Raymonde’s poetry is refined by the deferral of expression and by her eventual recognition of her own psychic strategies: such as transformation (in which drives and instincts undergo a process that parallels linguistic processes), repression, and condensation and displacement by the internalized “psychic censor” (Silverman 61, 63). The secondary process, in connecting mnemonic traces to the socially determined structure of language, diminishes the affective intensity of those traces and creates voluntary memory. Raymonde’s poem functions like the secondary process; it masters and
contains the traumatic shock through condensation and displacement. Despite Freud’s identification of the poet’s Eros with the life-instincts, Raymonde’s poem functions like the secondary process. Her poetic labor subserves the death-instincts by transmuting the intensity of traumatic memory and desire for the other into the anodyne of the poem. Nonetheless, the power of involuntary memory, its affective intensity, is precisely what writers such as H.D., Woolf, and Proust seek, not merely to represent, but to recreate experientially in their readers. Proust’s “Overture” describes this quest to capture the involuntary memory when Marcel puts down his cup to examine his mind,

> It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day. (49)

Usually “the word-presentation or linguistic signifier” fulfills the pleasure-principle by functioning to “dampen down the affective and sensory appeal of the thing-presentation or signified” (Silverman 84). However, as in Marcel’s use of the evocative names “Balbec, Venice, Florence,” poetic language can sometimes thwart the secondary process and favor the primary (Silverman 84).

Modernists’ interest in writing these scenes of traumatic memory seems, at least in part, to be the attempt to put into language the power of the mnemonic trace that is unbound by language; it is the “shock” and “traumatic” stimuli that is able to “break

---

9 Freud concludes, “The pleasure-principle seems directly to subserve the death-instincts; it keeps guard, of course, also over the external stimuli, which are regarded as dangers by both [death and life] instincts, but in particular over the inner increases in stimulation which have for their aim the complication of the task of living” (Beyond 83).
through the barrier” of our secondary process (Beyond 34). In encountering traumatic stimuli, according to Freud, “the pleasure-principle is put out of action,” as “[t]he flooding of the psychic apparatus with large masses of stimuli can no longer be prevented,” and thus the psychic apparatus redirects its energies toward bringing “the stimulus under control, to ‘bind’ in the psyche the stimulus mass that has broken its way in, so as to bring about a discharge of it” (Beyond 34). The paradox of these texts is that they attempt to provide a structure, to bind into a text’s language, the involuntary, immaterial, unconscious, and unbound—the moment of being’s affective intensity. However, it is precisely the processes of language that defuse the moment’s intensity. Lyric narrative is an attempt to write the moment and (allow the reader to) have it too.

The tension of lyric and narrative, then, can be understood as a negotiation of primary and secondary processes, of the life and death-instincts. The back and forth of the life and death-instincts of the pleasure-principle are expressed by Mephisto in Act I of Faust according to Freud. Freud argues against man’s seeming progressive “impulse to perfection,” contending instead that man who “urges forward, ever unsubdued” is driven by repressions of instinct that bar the path “back to complete satisfaction” (satisfaction is located in the backwards movement toward stasis) and so “there remains nothing for it but to proceed in the other, still unobstructed direction, that of development, without, however, any prospect of being able to bring the process to a conclusion or to attain the goal” (Beyond 53). Closure (ideally a return to the quiescent state) is endlessly desired and deferred. “There is as it were an oscillating rhythm in the life of organisms: the one group of instincts presses forward to reach the final goal of life as quickly as possible, the
other flies back at a certain point on the way only to traverse the same stretch once more from a given spot and thus to prolong the duration of the journey” (*Beyond* 50-51).

Laura Mulvey in writing of narrative cinema that “Sadism demands a story” (that is, sadism serves the progression of narrative) (840), does seem to rightly interpret Freud’s analysis of the expression of the pleasure-principle in literature. Freud associates sadism with Eros, the poet, and with the life-instinct that “holds together,” whereas he associates masochism, “the turning of the instinct against the self,” with the regressions of the death-instinct which strives to circle back to the state of non-being, of stasis (*Beyond* 64, 70). 10 Freud intentionally invokes both time (deferral) and space (circling back) here in mapping the relationship between sadism and masochism, the life and death-instincts; sadism demands chronology, the story a linguistic structure. Freud proposes that “[t]he Kantian proposition that time and space are necessary modes of thought” should be understood as originating in the psychic apparatus *Pcpt.-Cs.* (perception—consciousness) (*Beyond* 32). 11 The “unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’ […] they are not arranged chronologically, time alters nothing in them, nor can the idea of time be applied to them” (*Beyond* 32). It is after the introduction of the preconscious and “a self-perception of it” that we derive our “abstract conception of time” (32). Freud thus links the development of the psychic apparatus (the

10 The association of narrative with Eros is an old story; Maximus of Tyre in his *Orations*: “Sokrates calls Eros ‘sophist,’ Sappho calls him ‘mythweaver’” (Carson 382).

11 Caruth discusses Freud’s life and death-instincts in understanding a history of trauma, emphasizing that the “awakening out of a ‘death’ for which there was no preparation” is the trauma rather than the “imposition of death”; “it is in the attempt to master this awakening to life that the drive ultimately defines its historical structure: failing to return to the moment of its own act of living, the drive departs into the future of a human history” (65).
preconscious and unconscious mutually determining one another) with humankind’s conception of time and, ultimately, narrative. The timeless (associated with the lyric mode) Freud defines in a mutual tension with the construction of a linear and progressing time (associated with the preconscious and narrative).

Involuntary memory, as described by Proust, operates along this timeless, lyric axis. In an individual’s experience of involuntary memory, latent affective mnemonic traces are activated by a dialectical object (the object in the subject’s present perception that corresponds to those traces from the past). In the literary text, involuntary memory operates by vertical (lyric) correspondences and indeed halts the narrative movement forward. Nonetheless, it is only by the narrative movement forward, urged to press onward by the life-instincts, that the subject initially experiences psychic intensities that are bound as latent traces. It is through the journey and progression of narrative that the subject pursues these deferred desires or is pursued by them, and rediscovers, over time, present correspondences that re-invoke the absent and latent affective intensities. Thus the rhythm of lyric narrative texts, which concentrate on the back and forth of these psychic processes, might be charted as a spiraling helix rather than a linear progression. Further, the lyric narratives examined here draw attention to this structure.

In the works of Proust, Woolf, and H.D., the artistic rendering of the pleasure-principle is unique in the text’s representation of the dialectical object, with its corresponding potentia for explosive affect and sensory intensity in the subject’s subconscious. The reader is granted not only the primary enjoyment of that affect but

---

12 In the introduction and chapter two, I examined Woolf’s theorization of the progression of the history of the novel as moving in a spiral (in considering the innovations of particular authors) or helix (in considering these innovations in the context of socio-historical change).
also a secondary analysis of the structures and discourses that construct desire and pleasure. The intimacy of the character’s standpoint (particularly in a lyric moment) creates the primary enjoyment of affect or intensity, while the intervention of a narrator or the self-reflexive scene of the artist-character draws readers back to consider context. The latter positions the reader with the implied author to re-compose the moment within a particular spatial and temporal narrative, thus granting the simultaneous pleasure of secondary analysis.

3.3 Composing the Unconscious: “On the Mimetic Faculty”

* fugue, n. 2. Psychiatry. A flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality [1901 C.R. CORSON tr. Janet's Mental State Hystericals]. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person’s outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure. [1923 OGDEN & RICHARDS Meaning of Meaning vi. 220; 1925 J. LAIRD Our Minds & Their Bodies iv. 86]. Also attrib., as fugue state. The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Ed.

* Palimpsest posits an ideal reader who can read between the lines to diagnose Raymonde’s malaise as paradigmatic of the socio-historic moment of postwar London. This synthetic tension between author and reader is heightened by the fugal depiction of the mental departures of Raymonde’s consciousness from the story-time. Indeed, the above psychiatric definition of a “fugue” is applicable to the arc of the story. The ideal reader that responds to H.D.’s invitation is offered a case study of traumatic neurosis and how a philosophy of artistic vision can respond productively to the shocks of modernity. The second part of the story offers a perspective on an aesthetic response to traumatic
history in the fugal meditations that counterpoint the composition of Raymonde’s poem.

As Raymonde’s resistance to Ermy breaks down and she accepts that she must awaken from the “lotos-drug” of London, Raymonde’s thoughts underscore this need to read the past, act from that wisdom, and to write the future differently (98). In the first part, the repressed memory of the war is the overarching theme or subject of Raymonde’s psychic fugue state that is followed by a “pulse-beat” of a string of associations: the dominant recurring themes and variations that answer this subject are “London,” a repetition of “feet” (the traumatic signifier for the unspoken “war”), and “forgetting” (98).

Waiting for Ermy to arrive, Raymonde seems to have nothing to do in London but listen and wait, but, the narrator—perhaps voicing Raymonde’s internal discourse—corrects,

She wasn’t listening. She wasn’t waiting. She had utterly forgotten. There was a sound of feet. There were feet, feet, feet, feet passing up Sloane Street on the way to Victoria. London had forgotten. She was one with London. She had forgotten. She came to London to forget—feet, feet, feet, feet. There were feet passing up Sloane Street. She had thought she would be so happy […]. (96)

This braid of associations must be unraveled, and remembrance of the signified (soldier’s feet) and thought (poetic meters) must return, for Raymonde to begin the labor of writing.13 What Raymonde came to London to mummify are memories of the war, particularly the trauma of her stillborn baby, an ordeal marked by her hearing the soldiers

13 Barthes’s definition of textuality in S/Z as a process carried out simultaneously at five different, variously intersecting levels is relevant here:

The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (text, fabric, braid: the same thing); each thread, each code is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices form the writing; when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing; it expresses; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. (160)
passing up Sloane Street and exacerbated by the subsequent affair between her shell-shocked husband Freddie (who fails as a poet and a husband) and friend Mavis. Postwar London and its superficial social surface have granted Raymonde a reprieve from this trauma which can be extended indefinitely as long as she avoids the thinking and remembering that poetic labor requires, and she has accordingly postponed her trip to the “clear Alpine air” that inevitably “focussed” her mind (98). The first section of “Murex” ends with an ironic underscore of the association of her poetic identity with the buried war; the forgotten shuffling feet of soldiers are in counterpoint to the poetic meters and remembering creative writing demands: “Raymonde wasn’t going to face the matter. If Mavis wanted the young man and if Mavis got the young man—All’s fair in love and—feet, feet, feet, feet. They had all forgotten” (99).

The possible implications of that string of phrases is repeatedly pursued, woven, unraveled, and rewoven by both Raymonde and the reader throughout “Murex.” Commenting on the function of repetition in hypertextuality, Genette draws attention to the “differences, sometimes of a fundamental nature, in the modes of existence and reception, in the ontological status” of literary works, as compared to those of music and the visual arts: “consider, for example, the capital part played in musical discourse by repetition, for which there is no equivalent in painting, and almost none in literature, at least before Robbe-Grillet” (391). However, the fugue writings of the 1920s are notable precursors to the new novel. Repetition in H.D.’s “Murex” as well as HERmione is largely an attempt to create a similar ontological mode of “existence and reception” as a work in music or the visual arts might; while serving a “poetic” function, repetition also serves to approximate for the reader not merely a representation but a site for reproducing.
the experience of the character’s mental and emotional state in a continuous present. Genette’s typology of “transformation” in music’s hypertextual mode thus is relevant to a reading of these texts; types of transformation include transposition, variation, and paraphrase (388-89). In addition to these “textual possibilities of transformation,” Genette adds the performative possibilities of “interpretation” where “transformational capacity is multiplied by a virtually infinite factor” (389). Woolf’s and H.D.’s experiments in fugue writing demonstrate the range of types of transformation possible in literature and place particular emphasis on the “infinite factor” of “interpretation” by anticipating the performance of the reader after an interval. With such attention to form and self-reflexivity in an art of (psychic) fugue writing, the risk H.D. and Woolf tarry with is the creation of an inhuman edifice or an all too human preciousness, in other words, the risk of composing a text that cannot or will not be performed. In moving back and forth between lyric and narrative modes, they attempt to balance the intensity of experience with a critical distance and contextualization that draws readers to take up the performance.

Read as a literary transposition of a psychic fugue state, Raymonde’s preconscious is depicted in “Murex” as displacing and condensing affective memories that threaten to shatter her calm, static state. The story progresses rather than being caught in a kind of hysterical seizure, however, because this must be a continual process.

---

14 Transformation is also the word Barthes uses to describe the writerly text. Genette’s definitions include transposition (“a change of key or a change of mode within the same key”), variation (“constitutes a specific musical form or genre, containing within it all possibilities for transformation”), and paraphrase (“embroiders one or more borrowed themes from a whole network of ad libitum improvisations” and which “readily lends itself to playful, or even ironic, purposes”) (388-89).
given the intervening shocks of prosaic reality. Raymonde is broken from her mental fugue state of stasis and indifference, finally, because of Ermy’s intervention. With her preconscious repression of the past breached, a succession of image clusters then drives the narrative progression as Raymonde alternately faces and resists traumatic memories. The mastery of these memories, putting them into discourse, allows Raymonde to take up her poet’s identity as Ray Bart once again.

Throughout the first half of “Murex,” Raymonde’s questions—why think? what did Ermy mean to her? how could she make out what Mavis had done?—are not hypothetical, but trip wires that threaten to excavate a past, “some deep subconsciousness,” that her present fabricated social self sits uneasily upon (101). H.D.’s linking of Raymonde’s personal trauma with the trauma of the war, however, makes these excavations more than an intimately personal dirge or dig. Emphasizing *Palimpsest’s* broader significance in a planned introduction to the text, Robert McAlmon quotes an unnamed author who said of *Palimpsest*: “It is a tapestry hung between heaven and hell,” a “praise” which McAlmon finds touches upon the book’s link with “a generation that hung between heaven and hell” (241).

The importance of H.D.’s triptych is its effectiveness in remembering for this generation, without, however, becoming a commemoration of that generation’s trauma. Genette concludes that “the specific merit of hypertextuality is that it constantly launches ancient works into new circuits of meaning. Memory, they say, is ‘revolutionary’—provided, no doubt, that it is impregnated, made fruitful, and not reduced to *commemorating*” (400). Benjamin similarly attempts to counter the sleep-walking or stasis of traditional historicism. His methodology of historical materialism (taken up in
practice in the *Arcades Project* seeks to crystallize the socio-historic moment, which when pried free from the commemorating hold of an universalist historicism can “blast open the continuum of history” (“Theses” 262-3). Benjamin’s philosophy of history, one in which the dialectical image or moment is pregnant with latent meaning, is thus a “history of trauma,” that is, “it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; […] a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 18). The instability in Raymonde’s character of remembering and forgetting establishes a tension between the text and reader regarding remembering, rather than commemorating, repetitions of history.

Benjamin and H.D. sift the layers of history to uncover what is “fruitful” and launch them into new circuits of meaning. The traumatic of the past is made available to be awakened to, that is, read or experienced, for the first time. Nonetheless, H.D.’s readers, particularly in the late 1920s, were likely to share Raymonde’s ambivalence. Inheriting the trauma of the war, many would resist the difficult process of remembering despite an uneasy familiarity with the connection between forgetting or commemorating and deleterious patterns of repetition. Further, since H.D. distinguishes Raymonde as belonging to the category of those with “alert perception” that needs soothing, subsequent readers, who are always already in a “War and Postwar” period, are positioned to identify with Raymonde’s opening interrogative, “But why think?” (95).  

15 Lawrence Rainey in *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* holds up H.D. with Ezra Pound as “exemplary fables of modernism’s fate: H.D.’s participation in a modernist creation of a counter-realm to the public sphere […] led to a withdrawal from genuine social exchange, a retreat into the complacency of the coterie and solipsistic reverie” (170). While Rainey’s critique of H.D.’s belief in an intellectual aristocracy bears consideration, his reading of her texts (despite calling for more rigorous close reading) is quite limited. Rainey
challenge is to layer her palimpsest in such a way that the combination of the vantages of
the lyric and narrative modes leads to a more revolutionary than elegiac vision. Readers
are led to read back and forth—between a personal vision (Raymonde’s mimetic
function) and a historical vision (the thematic function of repetitions between the three
stories).

In “Murex,” Raymonde (like Benjamin in his analysis of Proust\(^{16}\)) uses the
metaphor of fabric for memory and the construction of identity: Mavis is a “silver thread”
which runs through her mind’s “fabric of a past London,” “and to jerk that one highly
flavoured thread out of her life’s fabric meant raveling edges, meant odd searing gash and
tear” (101). So rather than “probe” Raymonde resists, finding “[e]ven now something in
her inhibited her, held her back” (101). The jagged flow of Raymonde’s thoughts, which
shows that Raymonde is indeed beginning to think and thus tug at the thread of memory,
is inhibited and capped by the succinct statements, “Let well enough alone. The past was
the past” (101). Such withholding is connected to her “pride” and her “pose”: “She had
trained herself (or Ray Bart the poet had so trained her)” to carry on a conversation with
such amusing people as Ermy, “and to stand posed, apart, sustained in some other region”
(102). It is a “slightly weary, slightly battered affectation,” and the reader sees that this
pose must chafe since Raymonde also acknowledges that the fabric of her London “had

writes of H.D., “Her world was a cocoon, and she neither needed nor pursued the give-and-take
or exchange with others” (155). However, in “Murex,” H.D.’s foremost concern is to depict the
dangers of a social or aesthetic cocoon. Georgina Taylor’s study of H.D. in relation to a network
of modernist women writers offers a more nuanced analysis.

\(^{16}\) Benjamin writes of Proust’s move to a lyrical structure of narrative: “One may even say that the
intermittence of author and plot is only the reverse of the continuum of memory, the pattern on
the back side of the tapestry” (203).
changed somewhat. It had changed” (102). Yet she clings to her insulating layers of forgetfulness and returns to her refrain: “People [...] must forget or they would go mad with it—feet—feet—feet—feet—” (102).

Forgetting is explicitly tied to not writing for Raymonde. In severing thought/symbol from the memory of the past trauma, Raymonde is protected in a cocoon of everyday habit, what Woolf calls the cotton wool of non-being. For Freud, the structures of psychoanalysis are figured in terms of the mimetic capacity, thus analysis and reading are made foundational to ontological exploration. Similarly, as remembering and writing are connected for Raymonde, her repeated phrases, on the one hand, stand out as threads needing psychoanalytic probing and, on the other, are so tightly woven that they allow her to commemorate and thus repress trauma. For Freud, understanding the compulsion to repeat came to mean a revision of his “psycho-analytic technique” so that the patient is no longer “read” as essentially a passive text. Psychoanalysis had been “above all an art of interpretation,” in which the physician sought to divine “the unconscious of which his patient was unaware,” to then communicate it “at the right time,” and “to compel the patient to confirm the reconstruction through his own memory” by overcoming the patient’s resistances through “transference” (*Beyond* 17). However, this method (like the classical readerly text’s revelation of a “true” meaning) does not bring the unconscious fully into consciousness: the patient “is obliged rather to repeat as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, recollecting it as a fragment of the past” (*Beyond* 18).¹⁷ Freud’s emphasis on

---
¹⁷ James Strachey’s translation in the *Standard Edition* is “remembering” (XVIII: 18). It is notable that the model of psychoanalysis H.D. parallels in Hermione’s talking cure in *HERmione*
replacing repetition with recollection (remembrance) is echoed in Genette’s and Benjamin’s descriptions of the quiescent quality of commemoration and elegy versus the revolutionary potential of recollecting and remembering.

Benjamin and H.D. share with their precursor Freud an interest in contemplating and making use of the homology of mimesis in the psychic and literary apparatuses, both in the character’s individual experience and in a wider socio-historical context. In “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Walter Benjamin examines the “phylogenetic and the ontogenetic” histories of humanity’s mimetic faculty, that is, the “capacity for producing similarities” (333). He follows Freud who in Beyond the Pleasure Principle connects the instinctive to the compulsion to repeat by examining it from “the germ cell” to “the living animal” (44-45). Benjamin’s and Freud’s discussions here, which move between empirical sciences and philosophical reflections, reveal a desire for a unified system that might be found in pursuing the mimetic faculty. Particularly in her earlier Notes on Thought and Vision (1919), H.D. also sought such a unified morphology, one that is problematized in “Murex” in Raymonde’s search for a single aesthetic-ethical law or formula. Whereas Freud gives the disclaimer that his speculations are made “in search of sober results of investigation,” and are thus free of the reproach that these results give “an appearance of ‘profundity’ or bears a resemblance to mysticism” (Beyond 46), Benjamin speculates with the intention of understanding the intimation of “mysticism” and “profundity” that follows this limited model of interpretation and revelation; indeed, Fayne’s reappearance at the end may suggest yet another repetition. In HERmione, however, Her has not yet taken up the pen (mastering the trauma via discourse).

18 Freud’s claim is that “all organic striving” is toward the inorganic, thus reinforcing his theory of the pleasure-principle by showing its counterpart at work in the theory of evolution (62, 47).
the psychic and semiotic apparatuses create. H.D.’s Raymonde, in her reflections on the role of art in the age of mechanized warfare, argues that art has lost the “magic it had in Egypt, Greece even,” for there “science and art and life […] were represented by a formula” (155).

Similarly, Benjamin writes in “On the Mimetic Faculty” that the seeming “decay of the mimetic faculty” is actually its “transformation” in “the observable world of modern man” (334). He concludes with this evolutionary map:

‘To read what was never written.’ Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift […] gained admittance to writing and language. (336)

One might add psychoanalysis and cinema, which read the unwritten trauma of the unconscious and the “unconscious optics” of our culture, to Benjamin’s evolutionary tale of the mimetic faculty (“Work of Art” 237). In Freud’s and Benjamin’s maps of the evolution of the mimetic faculty, psychoanalysis’s and aesthetic modernism’s attempts to write “what was never written” are the locus of humankind’s latest attempts to harness the affective intensity of the mysterious. By writing the unconscious processes that are distilled into the words of Raymonde’s poem, “Murex” allows H.D.’s audience to “read what was never written.” Further, in codifying the “unwritten” of the poet’s mimetic faculty, the text initiates readers into this modern magic; H.D.’s strategy for getting “magic” back into art is to bring her readers into the “magic” of the process itself (155).

According to Benjamin, “the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element”; in that element “nonsensuous similarity” is illuminated, being limited in both its production and
perception by man “to flashes. It flits past” (335). The synthetic dimension of “Murex,” its self-reflexivity in foregrounding the mimetic faculty of its protagonist, does not thereby destroy the “magic” of nonsensuous similarity. Rather, it multiplies the potential flashes of illumination in the reader by placing the reader in the role of analyst/reader of the mimetic faculty as it is seen to operate in Raymonde’s poetic power. Readers analyze Raymonde’s repression as she begins to “read” her own repressed memories and as she progresses through a kind of writing cure which transforms her destructive past into a lyric in the “semiotic element” (“Mimetic” 335). In seeming to read Raymonde’s unconscious side by side with the production of her poem, readers witness the alchemical power of language. H.D. attempts to depict the writer’s process of transmuting affective memories into language—the materials and crucible and then the flash of poetic inspiration—as well as to construct the potential for readers to experience the flash in their “experiential reproduction” (Nicholsen 64).

3.4 The Work of Art in Palimpsest

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin examines the similar alchemical magic of the silver screen. This essay assesses the social significance of the new technology and art of cinema as well as the auratic mechanism of the artwork. It is particularly relevant to “Murex” since H.D.’s Raymonde describes her ontological perception in terms of a “cinematograph” as well as in terms of layers of other works of art, such as Botticelli’s *Primavera*. According to Benjamin, the unique power the filmmaker has (as “[m]agician and surgeon”) in projecting “reality” is his ability to penetrate “deeply into its web” (“Work of Art” 233). Benjamin uses Freudian
theory to examine how the “film has enriched our field of perception,” concluding, “[t]he camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (237). How cinema enriches and alters the perceptual matrix is similarly examined by H.D.’s portrayal of Raymonde. As Baudry has written in “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema,” “[f]rom Plato to Freud” the psychic topography has been figured as such a simulation machine capable of offering the subject representations that are experienced as perceptions (744).\textsuperscript{19}

In his “scene of the cave,” Freud asks the prisoners “to consider the apparatus to overcome their resistances, to look a little more closely at what is coming into focus on the screen, the other scene” (Baudry 760). Freud himself does not use the metaphor of cinema, perhaps because it is already “too technologically determined” according to Baudry; Freud does, however, write in \textit{An Outline of Psychoanalysis} that we imagine the psychical apparatus as “a kind of telescope, or microscope” (761). Raymonde also comes to see herself as embodying the lenses of a telescope and a microscope as she writes a poem of and to Ermy: “Now she had her in perspective, had pinned her so to speak under this substance of her brain that was like a microscopic lens, that was like a telescopic lens bringing the distance near. This lens, her mind, brought antiquity near” (162).

Benjamin’s definition of aura is also predicated on one’s perception of distance. The “aura” of “natural” objects is “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”; likewise the aura of the “work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in

\textsuperscript{19} Baudry writes, “we are dealing here with an apparatus, with a metaphorical relationship between places or a relationship between metaphorical places, with a topography, the knowledge of which defines for both philosopher and analyst the degree of relationship to truth or to description, or to illusion, and the need for an ethical point of view” (760-61).
the fabric of tradition” (220-23). Benjamin argues that contemporary culture is driven by
the desire to “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,” to “pry an object from its
shell, to destroy its aura” (223). As the story progresses, Raymonde’s metaphors for her
vision of Ermy shift from the technology of telescope and microscope to projector and
film. Just as Benjamin’s essay describes cinema’s ability to both destroy and create aura
(via the star system), Raymonde’s focus on Ermy reveals both a desire to “pry” and pin
her as well as a desire to project her into a timeless work of art. Employing these visual
technologies metaphorically, Raymonde reflects on her poet’s consciousness as history’s
cinematograph, and as the present illuminates the repressed events of her past, she
examines them as shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave (169).20

However, overlying her personal trauma are the repetitions of history’s traumas:
Raymonde’s cinematograph metaphor figures history as layers of celluloid (as in a film’s
reel), a semi-transparent substance running on indefinitely, through which the light of
antiquity, “flashes of pure fire-blue,” illuminates particular moments (164). The choice
of blue for the fire of antiquity is extended in Raymonde’s projection of Ermy as
timeless; she has a vision of blue hyacinths in Ermy’s hair as she transforms the other
into a mythological figure in her poem. These visual metaphors of lenses and projections
between Raymonde and Ermy create historical and personal, as well as cultural and
religious, correspondences. For example, Raymonde is not surprised that Ermy would
deviate from keeping up the game of not-remembering, since she attributes to Ermy a

20 Raymonde recalls that “Plato said (circa 500 B.C.)” that modern life was like shadows seen on
a cave wall; the “brilliant decadence” of Athens parallels “life now,” when “[t]he antiquity of
1917 (like Plato’s transient Athenian antiquity) shone as a shadow” (169).
racial intuition—“Jews had an odd way of surprising her off guard,” of “espy[ing] in her” (despite her “most Raymond-ish” pose of indifference) “some deep root of resemblance (how ever did they ever do it?) to Ray Bart” (102). Raymonde thus projects onto Ermy an ability to “see” beneath the cocoon of her indifferent persona to her buried poetic identity of “Ray Bart,” her pseudonym; further, Raymonde projects this privileged vision onto a Jewish identity.21

This projection serves several functions in Palimpsest. First, anthropologically, it allows H.D. to show how religions have similarly interpreted the order of things. Evoking a series of polarized cultures, Athens and Rome, Cret-d’y-Vau and London, Egypt and America, the three stories move neither toward hierarchy nor fusion but a both/and model. Her dialectics suggest that each culture contains (at least) two subsets that are mutually reinforcing and intertwined. As Joyce writes in Ulysses, “Jewgreek is greekjew” (15: 2097-8). Second, Raymonde’s projection of Ermy as a Jew is tied to Raymonde’s recurring attempt to formulate an enduring ethical rule in understanding Mavis’s affairs with both of their husbands and the nature of her own relationship to Ermy. Raymonde attributes the golden rule (which she believes is broken) to Christ but then uncovers an earlier source, unnamed but who is presumably is Rabbi Hillel. Third, this projection offers another correspondence to Freudian psychoanalysis.22

21 Raymonde’s projection of Ermy as the ethnic other rightly raises postcolonial alarms in contemporary readers. However, here it is necessary not to attribute this to H.D.’s naïve projection; it is Raymonde (a character we are meant to critique) that poses and projects Ermy as a Jew possessing a privileged capacity to “see” or read her poetic self.

22 Caruth’s discussion of Freud’s telling of the story of “the traumatic history of the Jews” in Moses and Monotheism is a useful reference here. Freud’s late work shares the ambivalent Messianism of Benjamin’s late theoretical work. For Freud “a history of Jewish survival” signifies “both an endless crisis and the endless possibility of a new future” (68).
Raymonde notes Ermy’s Jewishness whenever she resumes a position of resistance against the traumatic memories Ermy invokes. Freud, in his article “Resistances to Psycho-Analysis” (1925), examines both the patient’s individual mechanisms and motivations for resistance as well as society’s resistance to psychoanalysis as a science and practice. He concludes with a striking identification of himself as an outsider, connecting his ethnicity and intellectual vanguard, a tangent that writes what is rarely written (as Freud notes) and is worth quoting at length:

the question may be raised whether the personality of the present writer as a Jew who has never sought to disguise the fact that he is a Jew may not have had a share in provoking the antipathy of his environment to psycho-analysis. An argument of this kind is not often uttered aloud. But we have unfortunately grown so suspicious that we cannot avoid thinking that this factor may not have been quite without its effect. Nor is it perhaps entirely a matter of chance that the first advocate of psycho-analysis was a Jew. To profess belief in this new theory called for a degree of readiness to accept a situation of solitary opposition—a situation with which no one is more familiar than a Jew. (XIX: 222)

Ermy’s power to see through Raymonde’s pose of indifference and affectation is associated by Raymonde with Ermy’s Jewish identity; and the identity that Raymonde believes Ermy espies in her—Ray Bart—is the poetic self that is engaged in reading and writing her perception of the world. Moreover, Raymonde views her own poet’s identity, an outsider ready to accept a situation of solitary opposition and the work of remembering, as rooted to Ermy’s Jewish identity (102).

While the scene of the two women talking suggests the analyst’s couch, Raymonde is not merely a patient dominated by the death-instinct. Rather, Raymonde embodies the productive tension of the life- and death-instincts. Raymonde is both analysand and analyst who must reconcile her Janus-like role as subject and artist in the world by recollecting rather than merely repeating her trauma (Beyond 18). Accordingly,
H.D. does not fashion Ermy as an analyst figure either; indeed, Ermy’s subjectivity becomes problematically unknowable in “Murex.” Ermy first serves as Raymonde’s “psychic gramophone or wireless, that had power of recording the exact past,” thus allowing Raymonde to experience that past for the first time, “to be hearing something that she had often heard in her own consciousness but never listened to” (108). As Raymonde listens to the past, which is tied to the poetic labor of remembering, her creative impulse reemerges. Ermy then becomes a screen, a “blank, a tabula rasa,” onto which Raymonde can project and then read her own repressed trauma (126). Ermy, romanticized by Raymonde when she begins composing her poem, becomes both a muse and audience (the addressee of the poem) fueling Raymonde’s efforts to “carry on” in her role as the poet Ray Bart.

These dialectics—of the life- and death-instincts, of analyst and analysand, of poet and muse—are seen in Raymonde’s resistance to the poet’s work of remembering which H.D. nonetheless represents in Raymonde’s use of a series of creative metaphors: of Ermy and herself engaged in a chess match, a card game, a duel, and ultimately as figures in a painting. The last metaphor is most interesting because it situates Raymonde and Ermy in a painting known for its many layers and triptych design, Botticelli’s Primavera, which Raymonde saw in Florence on her honeymoon before the war. This work of art proves the dialectical image that sparks Raymonde to recall her poet’s identity and her work of remembering as an artist.23 The intertext of the painting arises at

---

23 Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image can be mapped at the interface of the literary and psychic mechanisms. As both Gérard Genette and Kaja Silverman note, Proust’s concept of involuntary memory implies a transposition of the literal psychic mechanisms (one’s personal experience of memory) and literary mechanisms (the use of metaphor and image) for processing
a significant turning point in Raymonde’s resistance, when Ermy turns to the subject of Raymonde’s poetry and provokes Raymonde to think, reluctantly, of “Keats, Browning. Who fished the murex up?”—references which she associates with her own prewar poetry and Florence. Raymonde comments on the pictures Ermy will see there: “I still claim fealty to the eternally over-worked Botticelli ‘Spring.’ […] Back of the Botticelli there is another Botticelli” (103). Realizing too late that this artwork, “a window,” will lead her deeply into her subconsciousness, Raymonde vainly attempts to divert Ermy. She turns instead “for her ‘protection’” to the “small poisonous grenade” of “the very word ‘Mavis’,,” a subject meant to redirect her to Ermy’s own story of betrayal, but which ultimately unearths Raymonde’s (103).

H.D.’s choice of the Primavera as an intertext is interesting for several reasons. In the synthetic dimension, it is interesting for its evocation of an idealized avant-garde in the Renaissance of Lorenzo de Medici’s Florence, its use of layers, and its inclusion of a transformation of Greek mythology (Chloris) to Roman (Flora). In the mimetic dimension, for Raymonde, it serves not merely to signify a memory of a time lost (her prewar honeymoon, the Renaissance), but also as a way of re-membering that past. Prefacing the subsequent sections, in which Raymonde mentally duels with Ermy, is a link of the picture’s palimpsest with “Murex”’s other palimpsests—representing art, pre- and postwar London, and Raymonde’s identity: “Behind the Botticelli there was another Botticelli, behind London there was another London, behind Raymonde Ransome there

one’s perception of the self in the world. In other words, one’s sense of being in the world is in the interface of psychic and literary discourse. Genette writes: “There is, for every circumstance, one ‘inevitable’ image,” and in Proust’s practice, “the criterion might be simply that a good metaphor is one that imposes itself without effort or contest” (109).
was [...] Ray Bart” (104). In listening to Ermy’s story, Raymonde gets beyond the surface texts, recalling details and examining her own story. Finally facing her repressed trauma, it seems that Raymonde uses the painting to compose her past—projecting her memories onto it as a way to order and awaken to that experience. Raymonde reads the painting from right to left—substituting members of her past and present (Freddie, Ermy, Mavis, Marion, and Martin) for the figures on the canvas.

I should note that H.D.’s use of the painting is allusive, and at no point does Raymonde or the narrator state that she is in fact “reading” and “writing” on the ground of the painting in this way. However, the allusions are pervasive, beginning with Raymonde’s view of her prewar-self as the nymph Chloris, become Flora in her abduction by Zephyrus (Chloris flees from Zephyrus on the right-hand side of the painting). Raymonde later recalls a dialogue with Freddie, who calls her “Fleurette,” during their trip to Florence when she attempted to put off England and marriage for “later” while she admires “these Italian primaveres” (140). Suggesting her subsequent

---

24 H.D.’s metaphors of the veiled painting, the self within a self, and the armor which Ermy finds a chink in are evocative of Freud’s metaphor for the preconscious, the “protective barrier against stimuli” which is the “outermost layer” that has been sacrificed so that it “makes it impossible for the energies of the outer world to act with more than a fragment of their intensity on the layers immediately below which have preserved their vitality” (Beyond 30-31). It is Palimpsest that Freud read in preparation for H.D.’s analysis, and in H.D.’s portrayal of their analysis in Tribute to Freud, she uses many of the same metaphors she had used in “Murex.”

25 The Primavera is usually read as an allegory of the coming spring. To the right of Venus at center, a death-like Zephyrus grasps the fleeing Chloris, who is transformed into Flora (visually, Chloris seems to reach out to the indifferent Flora). To the left of Venus, the three Graces move in a circular dance, while to their right Mercury faces off-left, dispersing the clouds from Venus’s garden with an upraised caduceus. Venus, who looks directly at the viewer, seems to stand apart from the unfolding allegory. Given Raymonde’s vision of herself as a “Savonarola” wanting to protect Ermy (132), the socio-historic context of the painting is particularly relevant: see Charles Dempsey’s The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli’s Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent.
metaphor of a cinematograph, Raymonde’s projection of the *Primavera* is not static but layered. When Ermy becomes a “mirror,” a “(a highly refined surface) [who] collected, concentrated, gave her back a self that she had so long let drift under drug and anodyne of London,” Raymonde then “turned (changing sides, changing now the angle of her observance with almost every heart-beat)” (118). The metaphoric palimpsest of the figures of the Botticelli also changes sides; the reader moves from the triangle of the right hand side (Flora, Chloris, Zephyrus) to Raymonde observing the three women of her past and present (the *Primavera*’s three Graces). Raymonde imagines a scene which places herself, Mavis, and Ermy alone before a mirror (a revision of a memory of herself and Freddie before a mirror and Ermy’s description of a memory of herself and Mavis before a mirror). The women’s triangle of gazes in Raymonde’s imagined scene evokes the three Graces at the center of the *Primavera*, and Martin’s and Freddie’s belated (and disruptive) appearances in Raymonde’s imagined scene evoke Botticelli’s Mercury and Zephyrus on either side of the painting. However, Botticelli’s Mercury, on the left-hand side of the painting, also finally comes to represent Ray Bart—Raymonde’s repressed poet self; he wears a sword (which Raymonde has metaphorically wielded against Ermy) and disperses the clouds (the London fog) with a caduceus (H.D.’s treasured symbol of creative healing).

Having recalled both her prewar self and the self traumatized by the war, Raymonde recalls:

(that other Raymonde’s double) Ray Bart, [who] held a gate-way to a city. […] Ray Bart would always sleuth and trail and track her […] Ray Bart who always checkmated her […] who acclaimed this Jewess. It was the poet, the young spearman who was Raymonde’s genius. Ray Bart held a sword of pure steel and it was Ermy who recalled her. (127)
In a kind of coda, Raymonde returns to the metaphors of the layered (prewar, wartime, postwar) London, Botticelli’s *Primavera*, and her metaphors of a chess game and duel. These are now resolved by the “shock” that Raymonde has been less an actor than a game board or canvas, over which Ray Bart has acclaimed Ermy, and Ermy has acclaimed the Ray Bart that Raymonde has kept at bay (127). From Raymonde’s perspective, the two have found each other out in spite of her own veils and poses.

Here I want to depart from “Murex” briefly to note that the “inward turn” of these high modernist texts nonetheless emphasizes the necessary presence of the other. Like Miss Craye’s gestures in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” or Augustus Carmichael’s presence as Lily Briscoe reads the past and paints her vision in “The Lighthouse” section of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, the inclusion of Ermy’s presence in H.D.’s “Murex” effectively opens windows on what might otherwise be a stuffy room. Both Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts turn upon a character who projects onto another character in order to access and re-compose the past to then engage in the work of art in the present. The presence of the other is essential both to the story’s progression and the ambiguous but critical distance between protagonist and implied author. Nonetheless, just as essential is the relative textual “absence” of that character. The other’s unique and mysterious subjectivity draws readers in as collaborators engaged in “seeing” the protagonists’ identities.

Carmichael is a continuous presence on the lawn as Lily paints; however, readers are never granted his point of view (as we are given Lily’s, James’s and Cam’s). Lily, nonetheless, finds his nearness and yet also his “distance” essential to her attempt;
indeed, she uses him as an object to explore the difficulty of “knowing” others (193, 173). Feeling that “the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality,” she fancies “that had Mr. Carmichael spoken, for instance, a little tear would have rent the surface pool” and then “[a] hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed. It was nonsense of course” (179).26 Lily projects onto Carmichael the necessary, linguistic complement to her painter’s vision: “A curious notion came to her that [Mr. Carmichael] did after all hear the things she could not say […] so that she thought he had only to put down his hand where he lay on the lawn to fish up anything he wanted” (179). Like H.D.’s Raymonde, Lily is carried forward by the intensity of her creative vision of “reality” and checked by the inadequacy of the tools she possesses to express it. She covers over her intensity with the phrase “nonsense,” and admits only in silence to herself her belief in the significance of the artistic act: she can only “hint, wordlessly” that, while phrases and paint may “pass and vanish,” “One might say, even of this scrawl, not of the actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it ‘remained for ever’” (179).27

---

26 This image recurs throughout Woolf’s work. In A Room of One’s Own, the narrator impressionistically describes the women’s college and perhaps glimpses Jane Harrison while waiting for dinner: “All was dim, yet intense too, as if the scarf which the dusk had flung over the garden were torn asunder by star or sword—the flash of some terrible reality leaping, as its way is, out of the heart of spring. For youth—— / Here was my soup” (17). In The Waves, after Neville has left after giving Bernard a poem alone in the latter’s rooms, Bernard reflects, “Between us is this line,” yet is grateful that the other has gone, since he can repair “the rent in my defences Neville made with his astonishing fine rapier” by cutting his illusion of wholeness (89-90).

27 Lily castigates the “miserable machine, an inefficient machine […] the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment” (193). Lily, like Proust’s Marcel, realizes that “one got nothing by soliciting urgently,” yet feels “heroically, one must force it on” (193). Like Proust’s Marcel and H.D.’s Raymonde, Lily sees her artistic efforts self-
Indeed, part three of Woolf’s novel strikingly parallels the depiction of poetic composition that H.D. writes in second half of “Murex”: “The Lighthouse” progresses through sections in which Lily encounters involuntary memories of her past with the Ramsays, comes to a fuller understanding of those others and her own life choices in revising those scenes, moves into an unconscious state as she paints, and then is brought “to the surface” again (178). As in the fugue structure of Fanny Wilmot’s imaginative composition, and as in the psychic fugue structuring Raymonde’s descents into subconsciousness and her resistances, Lily Briscoe’s creative process can be mapped as a series of episodes. Returning to the theme of Tansley’s assertion that women “Can’t paint, can’t write,” for example, Lily’s faculties are “lubricated” and her brush “had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her” (159). She loses “consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance” as “her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting” (159). For both H.D.’s Raymonde and Woolf’s Lily, rhythm comes to the artist from an external source, consciousness of self is lost, and the mind flashes up a series of seeming involuntary visions that are transformed by the work of art.

Woolf portrays Lily’s ability to see through the eyes of others as a prerequisite to her ability to paint. It is in the attempt to see from Mr. Ramsay’s, Mrs. Ramsay’s, Carmichael’s, and Tansley’s standpoints that Lily is able to reach the “razor edge of balance” that allows her “to be on a level of ordinary experience” and yet to feel “[i]t’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (193, 202). Similarly, H.D.’s Raymonde must see from the

fulfilling in the heroic attempt, and Woolf in portraying the attempt (yet tempering the act always with irony) herself attempts to get “the thing itself” over to her reader (193).
standpoint of Ermy, Mavis, Martin, and Freddie in order to finally see her own reflection in Ermy and so to write a poem for her repressed poetic self in answer to Ermy’s invitation to connection (159). When Woolf’s Lily has achieved that balance and has worked around and through Mrs. Ramsay with “fifty pairs of eyes,” Mrs. Ramsay appears, submitting to be captured in Lily’s painting: “There she sat” (198, 202). Woolf, like H.D., grants her artist a self-consciousness about her use of the other to create that vision. Lily, thinking of her recurring theme of Tansley “making it his business to tell her women can’t write, women can’t paint,” realizes that in returning to this phrase of opposition as she takes up her paints, that “[h]alf one’s notions of other people were, after all grotesque. They served private purposes of one’s own. He did for her instead of a whipping-boy” (197).

Raymonde, in descending into the past that Ermy opens, continues her protective efforts of dividing self and other, of categorizing. However, like Woolf’s Lily, it will be necessary for her to recompose her feelings for the others of her past in order for her to finally write. Raymonde’s memory of the cruel nurses attending her after her stillbirth is entangled with Mavis’s cruelty; their words are juxtaposed with a doctor’s kind words (the only person she believes who had cared about her loss). She thus more clearly formulates her London as consisting of “Two layers of people. The worst. The very best. The most cruel, the most tender and subtly apprehensive” (111). Raymonde, whose repressed poet identity (Ray Bart) identifies with the outsider, prods Ermy (a Hampstead “odd Eastern Jewess”) with the question “Do or don’t you think I am like Mavis?” (112). Unable to receive the desired reflection, an affirmation of her difference, Raymonde
resumes her superficial pose among the “most cruel” of her two layers of Londoners, mentally blaming Ermy’s Jewishness for her attempt to “drain all the sympathy” (112).²⁸ Nonetheless, Ray Bart’s reawakening is inspired by Ermy’s presence as a muse in the London fog, and pushes Raymonde beyond London’s superficial surface and her psychological resistance. When the blue “flame” of Ermy flashes through the “over-layer of blurred reminiscence that was Raymonde’s formula for London,” Raymonde experiences a break though (112). Raymonde hears herself telling Ermy words she has kept silent for ten years, “I was so ill. I actually asked Mavis to look after Freddie,” which she repeats three times in a condensed form (113). Realizing, “in her mechanically conscious brain” her repetitions, the line is repeated again, and “Raymonde stopped” (113). These words seem to allow a release, as the hysterical circling of Raymonde’s internal discourse dissociated from the present is run-down like a broken record and the “psychic gramophone” “stopped” (108, 113). Raymonde sees Ermy as she sits before her: “Ermy’s eyes were wide and clear and burnt like fire. [….] In the interior of her room, those eyes regarded, looked, flared as a cameo in a dark chamber flares when a match is put behind it” (113). Besides evoking Plato’s scene of the cave, the scene echoes Woolf’s description of the epiphany in Lily’s reflection that the “meaning of life” was perhaps not “[t]he great revelation” but “little daily miracles, illuminations, matches

²⁸ This pose and overstatement on Raymonde’s part recurs later in “Murex” when Raymonde sees her ability to maintain her pose as a result of Ermy being “too involved in her own misery so far to pursue her first astonishing past inquiry” about Raymonde’s encounter with Mavis (123). H.D.’s distance from the character’s essentializing vision is emphasized in these overstatements; it is clear that Raymonde’s self absorption is paramount. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell whose cynicism underscores the irony of the observation of Ermy being “too involved in her own misery,” since Raymonde is capable of analyzing her own split motives and showing off her hypocrisies.
struck unexpectedly in the dark” (161). The “match burning in a crocus” (Mrs. Dalloway 47), marks the epiphanic moment in “Slater’s Pins Haven No Points” as well: “Julia blazed. Julia kindled. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star” (111). In “Murex,” the flame of Ermy’s eyes seems to light the cave of Raymonde’s own “subconsciousness so that she too sat erect, went back, back” (114).

First a site of transference for reading her own trauma, Ermy also offers Raymonde a “blank, a tabula rasa” for creation as Raymonde realizes “in a flash—how beautiful” (126). Ermy provides a screen for Raymonde to “flash” her projections across; Ermy’s beauty and foreignness (as Barthes theorizes in S/Z) is located largely in Raymonde’s aesthetic narcissism. That is, until Ermy prompts her to “come to”:

“London was not Limbo. It was actual. It was to-day. It was the very-present. Ermy had so made it,” and Ermy has “[i]n a flash” altered Raymonde by awakening her to the contingent world (126). Seeing that “Ermy wasn’t just this Jewess Ermy she was shocked, recalled, recalled to her own age, her own race, her own dissimilarity” (127). Raymonde has dismantled her mechanisms for distancing her sympathetic self and revived her artistic sensibility in her attraction to Ermy. Perhaps unexpectedly, not only is her poet self the more “human” self, but also the self in touch with the contingent world and time. Awakened to the flow of prosaic life, Raymonde is thus enabled to see poetry in the actuality of London and the present moment; like Woolf’s Lily she can return to the artist’s attempt to balance two levels of experience. Now Raymonde becomes insistent on breaking from “that aura of the past. She would come (with a thump) to” (136-37). Raymonde gives Ermy a letter of introduction for her trip to Florence and breaks the effect of a cave by switching “on the electricity with a vicious
little destructive jerk” (137). Ermy dispatched, Raymonde mentally repeats a wartime refrain of Freddie, accepting her role to “carry on, carry on, carry on” as “Raybart” (137).

3.5 To Write or Not to Write: The Art of Work

The second half of “Murex” follows Raymonde’s final descent, as she sits alone in the chair Ermy has left, into the repressed material of her past, and her work to understand the present with this past in mind. “Now having so far opened up this so far so hermetically watertight compartment of her own subconsciousness, she could see further” (139). Raymonde has suppressed her own desires and poet’s identity: first, in order to bolster Freddie’s identity as a poet and to become a mother to the child Freddie hoped “will perhaps carry on afterwards […] for me” after the war (140), and second, in waiting after the war for men such as Ermy’s Martin to take up the poet’s role and realize the “second flowering of the already over-flowered 1890s” that the war derailed (125).

Having been pressed by Ermy to examine the “associations” that have driven her to London, the memories blocked by the shuffling “feet—feet—feet” finally surface (138). The stillborn child and the stillborn generation must be exhumed before Raymonde can assess her own work as a poet.

Her traumatic experience of childbirth is recalled in the dialogue of the nurses over her hospital bed which resurfaces in Raymonde’s internal discourse, but here the scene, which has only been alluded to, is further elaborated. Raymonde protests as she hears the “Feet, feet, feet,” begging the nurses to “stop them,” the “tall, young gods” the soldiers going to the station (141). Foreshadowing Philip Larkin’s “MCMXIV,” Raymonde’s narrated monologue continues, “there were never more beautiful, never
more straight tall young men” (141). Raymonde hears the nurses rebuking her, telling her that she owes it to her husband to be quiet; however, in this repetition of a scene in which she has passively received trauma, the present Raymonde intervenes and replies, “But this is—my—husband—all this. ’ Feet, feet, feet, feet, feet. They understood pain. They understood death. They understood annihilation” (141). Despite the nurses’ overheard dialogue (that Raymonde as an American cannot “feel as we do”), Raymonde, in her recognition of this memory, identifies directly with the soldiers. She is giving birth to a stillborn child while young men march to trenches to become a stillborn generation. Raymonde also recognizes her answer, hearing kindness in the doctor’s voice, “we’re all so sorry, Mrs Ransome, for your disappointment,” and this voice is “the answer to feet—feet—feet—feet—feet” (142).

With this answer, a voice of care, Raymonde’s mind can defuse the traumatic refrain of the soldier’s march and turn to her work in the present again. Raymonde has stayed in London because of the feet that pass “forever past her window”; the present moment is what she is part of, rather than the past or future, and her role is witness to the continuous presence of those absent (142). Since people have forgotten, have “never really known or seen or cared,” Raymonde holds that “[s]ome must remember. She was a beacon burning for those who might remember” (142). Raymonde believes, “[t]hey would have stopped them if they had cared” (142). However, she sees a frightening recurrence of indifference: “Things were just the same,” and “the new Joan of Arc girls so blithe, passing all secure and undeviating up Sloane Street, didn’t know about it” (143). Here the refrain “feet—feet” is transposed and belongs to the younger generation of women who march under a false banner of progress. If these “new women” are as
doomed as the young men in the war (143), then Raymonde’s silence as a poet, her willed forgetting, has contributed to their presumed ignorance.

This shift of associations contains another key shift. Raymonde, able to “see further,” now considers the future latent in present action (or inaction), and marks women like Ermy as both her concern and hope. But the responsibility of care prompts a return to the desire for the drift of London; rather than herself having to “carry on, carry on,” Raymonde protests, “Let Martin do some writing. Or some of these Joan of Arcs” (145). Raymonde is tormented by an Ermy she sees from the shadows, she tells her absent presence: “Well, I had my dose, thank you, Ermy. It’s your turn. I can’t help you” and argues against the pulse-beat of poetry to “carry on,” again rejecting the life-instincts and poetic Eros (145). Evocative of Freud’s warning against repetition when the patient resists (Beyond 18), H.D. shows how Raymonde’s resistance to resuming her role as a poet is also a resistance to taking up an outsider’s role of critique and care. At stake is the decision to carry on with an ethical aesthetics despite the disappointments of the past and present.

Bernard’s soliloquy in the final episode of Woolf’s The Waves (which seems to be Bernard’s telling of the story of his life to a stranger at a restaurant), similarly portrays the warring life- and death-instincts, a resistance to the imperative of Eros. Interestingly, The Waves, like Palimpsest, shows the constructedness of gender and the false identification of Eros, the creative impulse, with the male sex. Whereas the artistic tradition has been dominated by men (a result of a social structure that privileges a particular sex), the creative impulse of these men has tended to be figured as feminine (the constructed gender duality of masculine versus feminine). Bernard says, “I was the
inheritor,” of “Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, […] Beethoven,” life’s “masters, its adventurers,” and so he is “I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on” (253-54). While the soliloquies of The Waves identify creativity with the bisexual or androgynous mind, the arc of text reveals how institutions divide men and women from childhood and favor men’s mastery of the symbolic (Louis, Neville, and Bernard are each encouraged at school to write critically and creatively, in contrast to the kind of social and domestic roles Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda are prepared for). As the poet, Bernard breast the flux of life: “in the oddest condition of raw rapture and skepticism, I took the blow; the mixed sensations; the complex and disturbing and utterly unprepared-for impacts of life all over” (254). Yet, the secondary process intervenes to divert those shocks: “A shell forms upon the soft soul, nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain” (255). Bernard rejects the “extreme precision, this orderly and military progress” of linear narrative that pads one from the blows of life as “a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it […] a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights” (255). So, sitting at dinner, “[t]here is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream” (255-6). “The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it” is an illusion, and attempting to tell the story of his life with “six little fish,” himself and

Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! (256)
While Eros provokes Bernard to revel in the challenge of composing this symphony, he is also lulled by the death-instincts to return to silence. At the “lowest” “curve of being,” he has felt the capacity to respond to and explore life with poetry ebb (269). Woolf describes this moment as seeing “through the thick leaves of habit” and the illusions that “keep coherency” (284), the narrative drive of Eros that, Freud writes, “holds together” (Beyond 64). Bernard (who, like Raymonde, sees himself as a split subject) says of this experience that the poetic self is silenced, does not grasp the threads to order them: “His fist did not form. I waited. I listened. Nothing came, nothing. […] It was like the eclipse when the sun went out” (284). “A man without a self, I said,” and Bernard asks how he can proceed “without a self,” and “without illusion?” (285).

Similarly, H.D.’s Raymonde has lost the illusion of poetry’s power to carry on and has lost that “self” in the wake of the war. However, the light and life-drive of the poetic self does return for Bernard, and this return suggests the return of modernist lyric after the shocks of the First World War blighted the initial flowering: “the landscape returned to me […] but now with this difference; I saw but was not seen” (286). Ultimately the poetic self leaps back up: “I said, ‘Fight.’ ‘Fight,’ I repeated. It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together—this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. […] I retrieved them from formlessness with words” (269-70). The Waves concludes with Bernard vowing to carry on, like Ray Bart the spearman, taking up the “spear” again and striking “spurs into my horse,” to ride against “death. Death is the enemy” (297). Both texts expose the necessity of narrative, a need for fictions or illusions to retrieve the self from “formlessness,” but with an irony that allows each to question our illusory fictions while
keeping open a viable "quest" by telling the story of the scene of telling a story or composing a poem. Bernard’s evocation against death, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” is counterposed with the impersonal, the world seen without a self of the interludes: “The waves broke on the shore” (297).

Although rallying back to his writer’s identity is welcome to Bernard, Raymonde finds the imperative to carry on and the pulse of life painful. Whereas “Murex” opens with the question, “But why think?”—and indeed, its first nine sections are dominated by the need to understand Raymonde’s choice of the fog and cocoon that solitary London offers, the last sections of the text and its creative climax center on the story’s epigram quoted from Robert Browning’s “Popularity,” “Who fished the murex up?” (95).

Browning describes Keats as the admirable fisherman who toils alone to fish ‘the murex up,’ crush its shell and distill its precious purple dye. While the speaker sketches Keats’s poetic process in tribute in Browning’s poem, in H.D.’s “Murex” readers are made to feel the rhythm of the creative process itself. Having spent so many years cocooned by the death-instincts, Raymonde protests, “[t]hat pain and that sound and that rhythm of pain and that rhythm of departure were indissolubly wedded. Or was it her heart beating? Feet, feet, feet, feet. No, Freddie, no Freddie not metres. Not poems. Not that kind of feet” (145). She continues to protest that she is listening, commemorating the past, but not remembering or composing that past, “not beat and throb of metre, no Freddie. I don’t want to write it” (146). But here the prose is broken by an italicized, set-off line: “Now she may say that I adore her face—” (146).

Raymonde’s poem comes out of “her set determination to see both sides and to see clearly” (148). Similar to Woolf’s depiction of Lily’s process of painting and
Bernard’s telling his life story at a restaurant table, H.D. depicts Raymonde’s poem as a distillation of re-workings of phrases and remembered moments of the past. H.D.’s depiction of the accumulating rhythms that culminate in lines of the poem are punctuated by pauses as the artist returns from a creative consciousness outside of time to a prosaic consciousness of the present. The prose also consistently returns to the ethical and epistemological problem of writing poetry, questioning “laws of hospitality” which Raymonde ties to “laws of song, laws of being” that are as “undeviating as the laws of sun and moon” (150). She concludes, “There were laws of right and wrong that when applied to the minutiae of worldly life held poignant and unswerving” (151).

Raymonde’s pursuit of the coincidence of the laws of song with ethical laws found in the “minutiae” of everyday life echoes Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image. Benjamin’s formulation of the dialectical image/object—“in which the new is intermingled with the old” (Arcades 148)—offers a reading of the modernists’ turn generally to the chance object as the locus of the lyric moment. For Benjamin, the dialectical image is the point of access, or manifest content, to an experience of cultural memory. Woolf and H.D. create characters who participate in and reflect on the artistic faculty of discovering “laws of song, laws of being” in “the minutiae of worldly life.” They contemplate the old law (romanticism’s lyric mode) made new again in prose, reflecting that the magic or alchemy of that moment of revelation is in both the personal flash of recognition as well as the moment’s embeddedness in a fabric of tradition.

Bernard, in The Waves, attempts to understand his own laws of song. He reviews how the objects that form nodal points in the six characters’ monologues appear over the course of their lives and against the larger backdrop of history, as well as how they
function to construct each subjectivity and how those subjectivities mutually create the others’ ontologies. Raymonde Ransome attempts to formulate a new law of song by comparing her own inchoate aesthetic philosophy with other artists’, both precursors (Robert Browning) and contemporaries (James Joyce). Again suggesting a theorization of the dialectical image, Raymonde’s theme of “laws of song” leads to another recurring refrain, “James Joyce was right” (151). Here Raymonde uses Joyce to support the assertion, “Inflexible laws were to be read in the meanest actions, the set of a ribbon”; these are “[l]aws like reading tea leaves” (151).

Throughout *The Waves*, characters “read” laws in the meanest actions and objects—such as the boys’ views of the flick of Percival’s hand to the back of his neck (36), the girls’ views of Miss Lambert’s amethyst ring moving across the page of a book (33), and each of their views of a red carnation at their reunion (127). Readers, accumulating these viewpoints in their present moment, are to “read” their own meaning in the matrix of gazes that registers the dialectical image. In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Fanny reads the characteristic clutch of Miss Craye’s hand around a flower as signifying the attempt to grasp beauty. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily reads, beside Mr. Carmichael’s benediction, the landing of the boat at the lighthouse as a correspondence to her having had her vision (209). In each of these texts, the sign

29 Fragments of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* began appearing in 1924; not only can the act of reading Joyce’s text resemble “reading tea leaves,” but Joyce uses the analogy specifically in reference to women writers in *Finnegans Wake*. Tindall, who tracks the significance of “tea” in the *Wake*, notes its significance in relation to the letter: “detaining our lecturer, it teases him as the *Wake* teases us. For good reason the lecturer calls A.L.P. ‘teasy dear.’ Writer of ‘some anomorous letter, signed Toga Girilis’ (112.29-30), she is a tea-girl who, putting on a *toga virilis*, has taken man’s place” (103).
hails the reader-character, who, as a writer or artist responds in kind by making of the evanescent gesture something permanent.\textsuperscript{30}

Nonetheless, this methodology—not unlike Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image as the point of access to, or manifest content of, cultural memory—is questioned. The final sections of “Murex” reveal a much more ambiguous and perhaps pessimistic strain than critics such as Susan Stanford Friedman, Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, and Cassandra Laity have acknowledged. Like Friedman and Kloepfer, Laity has read “Murex” as H.D.’s transformation of the romantic landscape to recreate “the regenerate paradise as the locus of a female aesthetics of self-identification—this time in her sister bond,” a process of breaking from a “thralldom to patriarchal conceptions of beauty and sexuality” (122). This is an accurate but problematic reading since Raymonde’s final “sister bond” with Ermy is one of artist and muse, a relationship that fails to subvert patriarchal conceptions of beauty or the artist-muse hierarchy. Through Raymonde’s romanticized projection of Ermy’s ethnicity as well as Raymonde’s projection of her as a timeless goddess, H.D. establishes a critical distance that implies a critique. Further, it is not clear how H.D. reconstructs a “female aesthetic” since Raymonde’s consciousness in “Murex” most frequently insists that male precursors—Browning, Einstein, Joyce (rather than, say, Sappho, Caroline Herschel, or Virginia Woolf)—are “right”; as Ray Bart, it is a bisexual ideal Raymonde pursues. In composing the poem, Raymonde interrogates the

\textsuperscript{30} Lily, coming to her revelation that the great revelations are perhaps the small daily “illuminations,” endows Mrs. Ramsay’s gestures with the power to strike such a match: “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” (161). This command to stay the moment is also an echo of Goethe’s \textit{Faust I}. 

198
limits of her art; moreover, H.D., in her representation of Raymonde’s internal discourse, artistically interrogates the political and ethical limits of her contemporaries’ and her own work. Critics need to reexamine how H.D. uses intertexts—particularly the recurrent references to Browning, Einstein, and Joyce in Raymonde’s internal discourse—to formulate a new law of song, one that can serve her ethical imperative. The juxtaposition of poetry and prose in H.D.’s story illuminates the possibilities of lyric narrative as a new kind of “song” that might serve such an imperative.

What is otherwise esoteric imagery in Raymonde’s poem—“the rose is scattered / and the sun is fled”—becomes dimensional for H.D.’s reader who also reads Raymonde’s unedited meditations that are distilled into the poem:

I sometimes think there never blooms so red. The rose—the rose—the rose—as where some buried Caesar. God, God. God—Caesar. Caesar bled. Caesar bled. Not that I loved—not that I loved—not that I loved. Not Rome, not Freddie, not Mavis, not Ermy. Something compounded like faces seen on top of another. Art wasn’t any more in one plane, in one perspective, in one dimension. (154)

The rhythm of the prose aligns the scattered rose of the poem with the young men of wartime London, and the poem’s references to Troy are attached to the cycle of wars throughout history. Ray Bart’s imagist poetry (the poem these thoughts are to be distilled into) is an art that cannot depict Raymonde’s vision of war since the poem is, to her, limited to one plane, perspective, and dimension (154). Rather, Raymonde must layer the palimpsest of wars and patriarchal laws, the perspectives of a shell-shocked Freddie, of Mavis and Ermy; the timeless poetic must rediscover its roots in the fourth dimension, time and thus narrative.

Both Browning’s “Popularity” and Joyce’s Ulysses depict the would-be artist’s relation to the avant-garde, the avant-garde’s role as opening new dimensions, and the
advance-guard artist floundering in the search for an audience in the literary marketplace. Just as Browning pays tribute to Keats while identifying himself as Keats’s contemporary and successor, not one of the “Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes” of the world, Raymonde pays tribute and affirms her identity as a contemporary of Joyce in her repeated assertions “James Joyce was right” (151). Raymonde shares with Joyce a belief in the alchemical power of art, pursues the epic as a revivifying frame, and believes that art bears the responsibility of remembering: “Joyce was right. It had lost. Art was magic but had lost. [...] Odd line in Egypt spelt exact and scientific formula” and, thinking of poetry’s task of remembering, “Mnemosyne,” she thinks, “James Joyce was right. Formula to be enduring must be destroyed” (155).

Raymonde also uses “James Joyce was right” to punctuate her belief that fiction must intimate a new sense of the relationship of time and space. In her vain search for undeviating ethical laws in laws of song, Raymonde is given the gift of relativity—and it is Ermy who has done it: “Yes, I adore her face for she has given me this. This knowledge that there is no law. The knowledge that there are laws” (154; emphasis added). This leap to relativity is confirmed as this episode of Raymonde’s composing concludes with her affirmation of a new metaphor for her poet’s perception—“some swift cinematograph” (163). She introduces and repeats the phrase “Einstein was right” to punctuate her formulation of herself as a glass refracting the past and the future: “The present and the actual past and the future were (Einstein was right) one. All planes were going, on, on, on together and the same laws of hospitality held on all levels of life” (166).
As in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” H.D.’s story depicts her female protagonist turning to astronomical imagery to depict a love between women that is not recognized by the hegemonic laws of their culture. Raymonde posits Ermy as a binary star, just as Her in HERmione projects Fayne as “a star invisible in daylight that suddenly by some shift adjustment of phosphorescent values comes quite clear” (225). Binary stars were also the phenomena that led Einstein to verify his theory of relativity, as Adalaide Morris has noted in How to Live / What to Do (155). The imagery of binary stars in these works suggests that it is their artistic consciousnesses—able to see multiple planes are “going, on, on, on together” (166)—that enables H.D.’s Raymonde and Hermione, Woolf’s Fanny and Lily, to see patriarchal laws as relative. This dialectical vision enables them to create in another direction, requiring different modes for expression, and drawing on other sources for inspiration. Indeed, in H.D.’s prose, sublimating the other woman as an astral vision in which she is both muse and sympathetic audience seems to be a prerequisite to Hermione's and Raymonde’s ability to create.

While acknowledging the “rightness” of her precursors, H.D.’s Raymonde nonetheless recognizes her need to make of the old texts a new work of art: “James Joyce was right. Formula to be enduring must be destroyed. […] Feet, feet, feet, feet, feet—the absolute lack of the salt in the formula had sent them to die—where some buried Caesar bled” (155). The formulas of art must be destroyed to create a rebirth of magic in art, so that art can have salt enough to alter the traumatic repetitions of war in history. It is in the new technology of cinema, with its power to manipulate time and space, that Raymonde finds a suggestion of magic. Here, diagnosing art’s shortcomings, Raymonde
goes on to imply that an artist who would create with an analyst’s ethic of care may have been able to intervene and keep soldiers from marching to Victoria Station. Raymonde’s process of refining old laws of art requires the dialectic of forgetting (clearing the surface of the mind for new composition) and remembering (reading the traces of the wax tablet of the subconscious in Freud’s analogy), a process she applies to both personal and historical trauma.

This remembering prompts Raymonde to insist on a paradox, “There must be one formula for all. One formula written in a cryptic language that everyone would understand” (156). As if offering a metaphor for the process of composing that is being portrayed, Raymonde sees “[h]er mind behind her mind [as it] turned the handle (so to speak) for a series of impressions that devastated her with their clarity, with their precision and with their variety”—as in a “cinematograph”—faces are overlaid as negatives pasted together, and the prose too enacts this layering by reprising the images and themes of the previous sections (157). Raymonde’s mind thus creates a new kind of palimpsest of history, (consciously or not) selecting scenes and images for a film reel that layers successive modernities: “Antiquity showed through the semi-transparency of shallow modernity like blue flame through the texture of some jelly-fish-like deep-sea creature” (158). With the timeless blue light of “antiquity” illuminating her mind’s projector, Raymonde reads the montage in order to formulate, or “fish up,” a new enduring art law. Repeating “James Joyce was right,” the theme of the epigraph is then “like some deep-sea jewel pulled up in a net squirming with an enormous catch of variegated squirming tentacled and tendrilled memories, just this, this—who fished the murex up?” (157).
Browning’s metaphor of the murex and his tribute to Keats underscores the paradox of Raymonde’s goal of discovering an enduring aesthetic and ethical law, “[o]ne formula […] that everyone would understand” (156). Ironically, this universal formula seems to require an intensely solitary, specialized effort, undertaken by the sacrificing few and with results marketable to the privileged, as it is written in “a cryptic language” (156).\(^{31}\) Browning’s question posed of Keats functions thematically to connect Ray Bart (Browning) to Joyce (Keats). As avant-garde scribes, these poets grapple with the abstract laws of song, however, they are also humans in a contingent, material world—the artist, too, must have his or her porridge.

Browning’s line, hauled up as a sea jewel from the tentacled mass of memory, also serves thematically to connect the poetic apparatus to the psychic apparatus.\(^{32}\) Able to be both twentieth-century equipped (cinematography and psychoanalysis) and tradition based (Browning and Joyce), Raymonde likens herself to the contemporary and precursor (Joyce) who fishes in the layers of personal and public memory (as Browning does in invoking Keats). Within this matrix of influences, we see Raymonde at work as she cracks her personal murex—Ermy, her projected idealized Other representative of this “modernity”—to extract its prized purple ink for her poem. In a long stanza of her poem, Raymonde contrasts Ermy to the pitiable new generation of women (whom she and the

\(^{31}\) Legend holds that it is Helen of Troy (who is also invoked in Raymonde’s poem) who discovered the murex’s purple dye (Jensen 106), and since it was so difficult to obtain the dye, it came to signify wealth and privilege.

\(^{32}\) Freud uses a similar sea metaphor for the unconscious in both *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and “A Note on the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad.” He describes the random movement of the unconscious toward perception as the surfacing and reaching out of “feelers” to sample excitations followed by a diving back into the deep (XIX: 213). Both Freud and H.D. mix metaphors of the sea/fishing with the surface-depth metaphors of a technology.
addressee of the poem, Ermy, are apart from), wishing they would “*speak / dare question, dare affront*” (160). Ermy is “a misfit,” “a Jew,” “a formula,” who “spelt something,” and it is up to Raymonde to translate her, to open and awaken her: “Unopened, unawakened. [...] Ermy wasn’t born. She was dead. The East. The Lotos of Buddha” (161). Here is the salt that might add savour to the West’s impotent laws of song.³³

Raymond’s mind compounds the laws “made for Jews” and the inflexible “Greek laws”: “This lens, her mind, brought antiquity near. It saw a world (James Joyce was right) in a grain, in nothingness” (162). The microscopic and the macroscopic are refracted through Raymonde so that Ermy becomes an oracle, a line drawn up from antiquity into modernity, linking the commonplace practice of reading “tea leaves” to “necromancy” (162). Compelled to relate their attraction to women, Raymonde and Helen in *Palimpsest* and Her in *HERmione* align their desire to ancient mythologies, which requires bringing obscured mythologies to the surface and reclaiming the role of Sappho from a male tradition. This projection also dramatizes these protagonists’ need to use their individual talent to re-forge a tradition obscured by a patriarchal tradition so that they may write, and live, the kind of life they desire. In looking to the past to write the present and future, however, H.D. does not attempt to erase the past, but to write over it: the palimpsest of these women’s experiences retains the lines of the previous texts and allows the reader to read their interrelation.

³³ Two of Raymonde’s stanzas punctuate this episode, depicting a gilt chamber and bed which foreshadows *Palimpsest*’s final story’s setting in which Helen Fairwood, as they leave an Egyptian tomb and move into “deep pools” of shade, considers the younger woman Mary’s companionship preferable to Mary choosing a safe marriage or herself seeking companionship with Captain Rafton (237).
Raymonde’s composition must achieve a balance between the life-instincts (Eros, “Love himself”) and the death-instincts; balancing the two, she achieves her vision, or “outlook.” The “room coming clear” again as Raymonde returns from the exalted realm of poetic creation to her prosaic room, Raymonde thinks of “[s]omething to eat,” now satiated with this “answer” found in the metrical law “that ‘hour’ rhymed with ‘flower’,” “a concise and absolute formula for her outlook. East and west. The seen and the only just not-seen. The absolute form enclosing the absolute vacuum behind it. The vacuum held and prisoned in a grain of mustard seed” (165). This pronunciation would be a logical conclusion for H.D.’s “Murex”; Raymonde’s satisfactory completion of the poem that ends with a reconciliation of the speaker with the muse and a suggested departure for “left over apple-tarts in the kitchen” evokes closure and a job well done (152). However, H.D. does not end “Murex” here. As an “instrument,” Raymonde is compelled to continue working on the poem, apparently not satisfied with her “absolute formula,” “the absolute vacuum” being held by the “absolute form” (165). Her readers should not be satisfied either.

Given the tortuous description in “Murex” of Raymonde’s progression from a psychic fugue state to a fugue of poetic creation—from a separation of her poetic identity from the contingent present to a reconnection of her poetic identity with prosaic reality—readers likely expect a poem quite different than the pseudo-imagist lyric that Raymonde produces. Critics have pointed to the poem as evidence of H.D.’s privileging of imagism as the most refined art, and even readers attentive to H.D.’s pessimism resist noting the
poem’s banality. However, reading only the italicized lines of the poem yields a series of refined images and vague evocations that are rather opaque and more than “a little Omar Khayyámish,” as Raymonde admits (154). Nevertheless, readers of “Murex” are in fact reading back and forth, and the inadequacy of the poem itself underscores the necessity of lyric narrative, the cinematographic mode, a form for H.D. and her readers to express more and “see further.” Behind the poem there is another poem in the prose. Indeed, Raymonde’s monologue offers a meta-comment on the prose/poetry juxtaposition: “There were songs within songs. The song within the song. The Murex in the deep sea” (163).

In fact, one of the most effective passages of “Murex” is Raymonde’s psychic fugue which includes songs within this song. Prompted by “songs,” Raymonde listens to a resurfaced memory of Freddie, one in which Freddie recounted to Raymonde his memory of picking up a “Liederbucher” that a German soldier had dropped: “Fritz is the limit, he drops songbooks and sings O Tannenbaum.” This memory leads Raymonde back to the broken law: “songs—laws, thou shalt love—” (166). In this moment, the reader simultaneously feels Freddie’s pain for the German soldier and Raymonde’s pain for the shell shocked Freddie who had predicted, bitterly, that the poet Ray Bart would be the one to “come through” and “carry on.” The reader experiences Freddie’s guilt as a poet turned soldier and Raymonde’s guilt (“poor Freddie, going on, on […] and all the time himself really wanting to write”) in taking his place as a poet after the war.

---

34 Claire Buck, who offers an excellent reading of the paradox of Raymonde’s efforts and the position of the reader in relation to *Palimpsest*, elides the poem’s quality in asserting, “The poem Raymonde writes, however, is made virtually impossible to read because it is never printed as a whole” (63).
(particularly since she finds the poetry at hand so ineffectual), and in failing to write
“[t]he song of all, all who had died” (166-67). In framing this layering of experiences in
Raymonde’s psychic fugue, H.D. as author, the text’s true cinematographer, is able to do
what Raymonde’s poem fails to do. H.D.’s prose portrays abject details of the war and
its wake by embedding them in a complex matrix of standpoints that intensifies the affect
of Freddie’s latent shell shock. The absence of these abject realities from Raymonde’s
imagist poem calls into question the satisfaction Raymonde has temporarily achieved in
her “absolute formula” and “absolute form.”

In writing Raymonde with a critical eye that exposes the inadequacy of the
imagist poem, H.D. has carried her own method forward. The reader experiences the
poignancy of a palimpsest of a history of trauma in reading H.D.’s narrated monologue of
Raymonde, not through reading Raymonde’s poem. The satisfaction Raymonde has felt
in finding “concise and absolute formula for her outlook” (165) is misplaced because her
poem’s rigidity and hermeticism fails to enact an ethical aesthetics. It is Omar
Khayyámish, it will not “awaken” Ermy, and it is unlikely to be published and read (161).
The poem itself is the satisfying formula that must be destroyed. When “Murex” ends
with the final stanzas of her disappointing poem, we have already read about Raymonde’s
decision to leave for Cret-d’y-Vau, since “London in perspective” must be seen from a
distance, “from the other end of a telescope […]. Seen like the Athens of Plato was seen,
as shadow” (170). This posited departure is the hope that H.D.’s story holds out, but it
offers as ambiguous a hope for the birth of a new ethical aesthetics as Stephen Dedalus’s
departure from Leopold Bloom’s home in the “Ithaca” episode of Ulysses.
3.6 Was James Joyce Right?

H.D.’s repetition of socio-political narratives from antiquity to the present suggests a compulsion to repeat that will not be derailed unless the unconscious/invisible apparatuses of a patriarchal social structure are confronted. Raymonde’s poetics and her departure, as H.D. frames them in the palimpsest, are ambiguous and refuse satisfactory closure. If Raymonde declares a will to resume her service as Ray Bart, it is perhaps with a difference. Here, at the conclusion of “Murex” and on the verge of completing her poem, Raymonde repeats one of her themes with a significant difference: “Banalities were the real facts. Fortunes in tea-leaves. James Joyce (she had found that the advance-guard of the intellectuals was usually on the right track) was in her inmost searching mind, repudiated” (171-72). Given that the themes and aesthetics of Joyce’s *Ulysses* are echoed throughout “Murex” (Raymonde and Ermy in London offer a variation on Stephen and Bloom in Dublin), this variation on the theme raises questions regarding “the advance-guard of the intellectuals” (172). H.D., whose prose writing is certainly on the margins, uses the palimpsest form to interrogate the artistic communities to which she has contributed as well as to invite readers to examine the “politics of identity” that inform art’s perceptual matrix (Vanderborg 100). Choosing this palimpsest form, H.D. reveals the paradox of her character’s and her own “marginal” writing: that, in theory, in order to effect change, difficult form is necessary; yet, in practice, the difficulty of the writing makes it less likely to effect political, ethical transformation.

By the late 1920s, such marginal writing faced an internal and external critique. In the May 1929 issue of *The Little Review*, a magazine of key importance to many “advance-guard” artists of modernism, editors Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap
announced its discontinuation. The issue compiles responses to their questionnaire from artists who have contributed to the magazine (including H.D. and Joyce). Jane Heap, in “Lost: A Renaissance,” prefaces the issue with an overview of the magazine and their decision:

The revolution in the arts, begun before the war, heralded a renaissance. The Little Review became an organ of this renaissance. […. ] No doubt all so-called thinking people hoped for a new order after the war. This hope was linked with the fallacy that men learn from experience. Facts prove that we learn no more from our experiences than we do from our dreams. (5)

In a stunning indictment of high modernism (and perhaps psychoanalysis), Heap has come to the conclusion: “Self-expression is not enough; experiment is not enough; the recording of special moments or cases is not enough,” and art has ceased “to be concerned with the legitimate and permanent material of art” (6).

Nonetheless, in the years leading up to this renunciation, writers such as H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin doggedly pursued the formidable “job for art” to bring about a critical organ of awakening by connecting the “recording of special moments” of the everyday to an expansive vision that included both the topographies of history and the unconscious (Heap 6). As modernism became established, broaching the canonical, authors of lyric narrative wrote self-reflexively, asking readers to participate in and interrogate the work of art (accenting both the reciprocal labor and the product of “the work of art”). However, such “difficult” art as a mode of philosophy, or philosophy in an aesthetic mode, relied upon the reader’s vision and refused clarification and closure. By the late twenties, it came under critique and was often abandoned. Theodor Adorno voices one such critique in his condemnation of Benjamin’s use of the dialectical image, primarily for Benjamin’s refusal to interpret the dialectical image for the reader and his
“mythologizing or archaizing tendency” in the Arcades. Citing his own work on
Kierkegaard, Adorno corrects Benjamin, “dialectical images are as models not social
products, but objective constellations in which ‘the social’ situation represents itself.
Consequently, no ideological or social ‘accomplishment’ can ever be expected of a
dialectical image” (AP 115-6). Despite the arguments of critics who advocated a return
to social realism during the 1930s, the decision of writers such as Benjamin and H.D. to
continue to work with lyric narrative and palimpsest is not naïve. Although H.D.’s text is
difficult, as McAlmon forewarned, in her refusal to dictate the text’s meaning or
foreclose the circulation of its intertexts’ meanings, H.D. privileges the reader’s
subjective vision as the “magic” that can add salt to the formula and alter the page of the
new.

H.D. turned to the cinematographic mode, the combination of lyric and narrative
in the new model of the old palimpsest, as a productive direction for avant-garde artists.
However, H.D.’s “Murex” emphasizes that her turn to the cinematic and palimpsest text
differed significantly from one of Raymonde’s avant-garde contemporaries. If James
Joyce provided the model of such a method in Ulysses, then the art laws that Raymonde
“repudiate[s]” near the conclusion of “Murex” are the art laws of Joyce’s Finnegans
Wake. It is the latter text’s perceived solipsism, its refusal of a mitigating thread of
narrative that would open the text to a larger audience, from which Raymonde breaks in
order to pursue her own formula. Indeed, this difference is made clear in the last issue of
The Little Review.

The replies to the Review’s questionnaire vary with predictable inanity—Djuna
Barnes offers a clever quip, Jean Cocteau includes “love” in each answer, and writers like
H.D. offer contemplative, over-earnest replies. H.D.’s answer to “Why wouldn’t you change places with any other human being?” is a recap of her metaphors of the self in *Palimpsest* and *HERmione*:

[... ] surely each one of us is a world to himself, a shell-fish of his own making. ‘We’ are all the same at root, all just one of those protoplasmic germs or spheres or globes that Plato talks about. ‘We’ differentiate one from the other only by the shell and as the shell is MY shell and as I have made this particular shell for my own particular line of defence, I can’t see what I should or could want with anybody’s shell but my own. (39)\(^{35}\)

Despite the individualism of her humorous over-statement, H.D. here again echoes Freud’s metaphors of how the preconscious (shell) forms in interaction with others and the world, thus constituting the self out of an integral unconscious self that is the primal common denominator of humanity. Although H.D.’s reply expresses an optimism towards the period, an exciting “era for the pure artist, to anyone who wants to make something out of nothing, something (to be more explicit) out of Chaos,” she yet identifies herself as “a reasonable being in a reasonable scheme,” bearing in mind how her scheme of living is one “wheel” that goes round “with the general scheme,”

---

\(^{35}\) In part 31 of “Writing on the Wall” in *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. recalls that the *Chambered Nautilus* by Oliver Wendell Holmes “had been a great favorite of mine as a school girl [...] its meters echo in my head now as I write this. *Till thou at length art free*, the last stanza ends, *Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!*” (43). In the same section, she quotes “Edgar Allan Poe’s much-quoted *Helen*” (her mother’s name), explaining that meeting Freud “at forty-seven, and to be accepted by him as analysand or student, seemed to crown all my other personal contacts and relationships, justify all the spiral-like meanderings of my mind and body,” and this homecoming recalls Poe’s poem, which is obviously a source of Raymonde’s poem:

*On desperate seas long want to roam,*  
*Thy hyacinth hair, they classic face,*  
*Thy Naiad airs, have brought me home*  
*To the glory that was Greece*  
*And the grandeur that was Rome.* (44)
sometimes to another purpose, but recognizing that the “world” of the self is always connected (40).

Whereas H.D. earnestly replies to each of the The Little Review’s questions (discussing her work on a “lyrical” POOL group film), Joyce sends “PROOF 5 of installment in Transition Quarterly No. 1,” a palimpsest-scored copy of a page of Work in Progress (i.e. Finnegans Wake) in lieu of an answer to the questionnaire. The juxtaposition is striking. Joyce’s page indeed illustrates the power of pure art to “make something out of nothing,” that is, the no-thing of language and the unconscious. However, the world of the Wake demands that the “general scheme” subserve its own orbit, and thus readers, even Heap and Anderson, are likely to find it “unreasonable” (40).

In “Murex,” H.D.’s Raymonde, asserting as a dominant theme “James Joyce was right,” shares with Joyce a belief in the need to master, expose, and break aesthetic “laws” in order to vitalize art’s power both as art and as social and political catalyst. Embedded in Ulysses and Palimpsest are depictions of this attempt—both Raymonde and Stephen are depicted writing poems—attempts which are both incomplete and perhaps failures. That these poems are bad, however, is precisely the point. This look back in the 1920s on a mode of poetics that both authors have moved beyond marks a place of departure after a brief crossing of the rays in H.D.’s and Joyce’s work in 1914, when their poems appeared in Pound’s Des Imagistes: An Anthology. Ten years later, both writers portray the limits of those sentimental and frozen forms within the context of new poetic

36 In 1931, Edmund Wilson described Joyce’s style in “Work in Progress” as that of a “palimpsest”: although the reader can “grasp a certain number of such suggestions simultaneously,” Joyce’s “systematically embroidering on his text, deliberately inventing puzzles,” becomes cumbersome and then “the illusion of the dream is lost” (266).
forms for the novel. Both characters are shown in flight at the end of each text, literally departing the scene as well as possibly moving toward an aesthetics that can both represent and critique modernity. The possibility of a new direction is glimpsed in the characters’ use of a new technology—Stephen’s stereoscope and Raymonde’s cinematograph—to represent perception. In beginning this journey, both Stephen and Raymonde must have a dark night of the soul, and be touched by an other (in both cases a Jew) who serves as muse and potential audience reflecting these outsider poets. The contrast of the shallowness or coldness of their poems to the depth and heat of the complex experience that each artist has in their contact with the other (Ermy or Bloom) reflected in the authors’ prose, leads each to discover that, as Stephen says of Dublin, “I have much, much to learn” (*Ulysses* 7: 915). In H.D.’s novel, Joyce had served Raymonde as a precursor and guide (in the same way that Browning makes Keats serve as his murex); nonetheless, in reading the palimpsest of her experience and the topography of the intertexts that make up her psychic fugue, Raymonde and H.D. must decide to go in a different direction than their contemporary.

Immediately following Raymonde’s repudiation, Raymonde’s thought continues: “Fortunes in tea-leaves. The world in a grain of mustard seed. Imprisoned in a nut-shell and king of infinite space. Bad dreams, bad dreams” (172). Like the Hamlet Raymonde quotes, and like Stephen after his theory of Shakespeare in “Scylla and Charybdis” is elaborated and denied, Raymonde is at a crossroads. Either she will reign and elaborate her universe in a nut-shell or she will act, and move out of the cocoon of protection that her London flat provides. In his lyrical book of the dark, Joyce far out distanced writers of the avant-garde, so much so that his elaborate play with signifiers is a game with few
and belated takers. In elaborating this nutshell universe, Joyce was viewed by many of his contemporaries as both prisoner and king of an empty space—a void with no answering light. Facing this black hole, Raymonde has learned that she must gather light and heat from her world and give back light and heat in her writing, as her repeated image of artist and muse as binary stars suggests. In order for her aesthetic laws to serve ethical laws, Raymonde must reassess her role as an intellection of the “advance-guard” (172).

Finishing her poem, Raymonde’s thoughts layer the images of Ermy’s and her own traumas one last time. She recalls Freddie’s words, but repudiates them as well:

Si j’ai parlé de mon amour. It was too late. It was all shattered. She must find other things, not stare and stare any longer into the crystal ball of her past, all the memories shut up in one small spherical surface, her own head, to be watched going round and round and round. Cret-d’y-Vau. She would go there. (172)

With this resolve, “Raymonde had the last stanzas,” the imagist stanzas that ironically complete the story (172). H.D. ultimately gives us a portrait of Raymonde as a maturing artist who must negotiate her own Scylla and Charybdis—on the one hand, rejecting the solipsism of her imagist lyrics, and, on the other, avoiding numbness and nearsightedness when immersed in the anonymity of London’s marketplace. The competing prose-poetry sections at the end of “Murex” emphasize the tension of lyric and narrative and affirm the

---

37 In his analysis of *Finnegans Wake*’s “infra-structure,” David Hayman implicitly argues that agreeing to play Joyce’s game means playing a narrowly defined role:

Joyce’s last book is most remarkably a play of structures, a game the reader exerts himself to play and which in turn vigorously plays the reader. Whereas most texts incorporate the figure Genette has called the narrataire (or ‘ideal reader’), implicitly, *Finnegans Wake* manipulates and teases in the reader’s name and virtually in his person. But, for this to be so, for the experience of reading to be one of making, the *Wake* must give the appearance of randomness when in fact it is organized down to its least unit. (129)
necessity of moving between the two modes if art is to meet modernity.

In “Murex,” a text that explores the discursive nature of subjectivity, Raymonde’s experience of trauma and repression offers the reader a site for examining both the personal and social forces implicated in that experience. Further, however, the distance of the implied author and Raymonde’s own self-critique in “Murex” call into question the poet’s or writer’s complicity in perpetuating the status quo that has led to her crisis. H.D.’s portrayal of the mythopoeic capacity of her protagonist is ambivalent: Raymonde’s pseudo-writing cure enables an ontological exploration, but seems also to offer only a tenuous practical response to that exploration. In other words, in H.D.’s prose work, the belief in writing as redemption—personal and socio-political—is ambiguous. While Raymonde is privileged by the narrator in her ability to draw out the tragic repetitions of history since ancient times in composing her poem and to identify with the scribes that have written against the devastation of war, the fact of the repetition of the poet as a Cassandra undercuts Raymonde’s redemptive role. The uneasy ambiguity H.D. inserts, then, is that the poet’s myth-making, mimetic capacity may subserve the death-instincts of culture, rather than the life-instincts that Freud identifies with the poet. The lyric narrative of *Palimpsest* and its self-reflexive scene of the poet at the work of art allows H.D. both to achieve and break open “The absolute form enclosing the absolute vacuum behind it. The vacuum held and prisoned in a grain of mustard seed” (165). Leaving open that gap, H.D. calls her readers to interrogate their fictions—both the ordinary, sustaining fictions of society that preserve the status quo and the extraordinary, revolutionary fiction of the avant-garde text as bearing the germs of revolution.
CHAPTER 4

CURRENTS OF A LYRIC NARRATIVE CINEMA: GERMAINE DULAC

4.1 Seeing Music: Germaine Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet*

H.D.’s response to *The Little Review*’s questionnaire for its final May 1929 issue, discussed in the previous chapter, not only indicates the new direction her writing took in the 1920s, but also her attraction to a medium that could both inspire her own lyric narrative writing and itself be an outlet for lyric narrative experimentation. H.D. prefaces her letter by noting that the questionnaire asked questions that initially seemed ones that “one must answer very solemnly like Proust, going in and over and into and around the subject, each question being a volume,” but now being in her “intellectual carpet slippers,” she instead offers a discussion of her new involvement in “pictures. We have almost finished a slight lyrical four reel little drama […]” (38). H.D.’s enthusiasm to discuss her involvement with the POOL film group rather than her poetry or prose (or to take up a Proustian line) is significant, particularly in this final issue of *The Little Review*, an issue marking, for Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson, the end of the thirty-year “renaissance” of modernist art and literature (5). Near the conclusion of “Murex” in *Palimpsest*, H.D. depicts the character Raymonde Ransome as also at a crossroads as a
writer, likening her poetic faculty to a cinematograph. Raymonde is ambivalent about the solipsism of the avant-garde yet earnest to cultivate an aesthetics that can “see further” into the individual and cultural unconscious (*Palimpsest* 139). While H.D. pursued goals similar to those of the period’s avant-garde cinema in her prose writing, like her character Raymonde, H.D. felt ambivalent about literature’s ability to “see further,” to achieve the aesthetic and ethical aims to which she aspired. Involvement in the POOL film group—writing for the journal *Close Up* and starring in Kenneth Macpherson’s film *Borderline* (1930)—provided hope. As the newest art form, and one that reflected an embattled ground for lyric and narrative modes, cinema offered H.D. a fresh outlet for experimentation and inspiration for her writing.

Although I will return to H.D.’s involvement in film, in this chapter, I focus on films emblematic of the evolution of a lyric narrative aesthetic within cinema which preceded the crises of the 1930s—Germaine Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) and *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927). These films, particularly the latter, attracted critical attention from cineastes, avant-garde artists, and journalists not only in France, but also in Britain and across Europe where journals such as *Close Up* and a network of cinema clubs championed her work. Dulac’s filmwork parallels the lyric narrative experimentation undertaken by Woolf in fiction and Walter Benjamin in criticism during the same period.¹ Whereas Dulac’s early 1920s films tended to include lyrical departures

¹ Although Leslie Hankins notes that “Virginia Woolf’s engagement with cinema and film theory has not been a major draw at the scholarly box office” (“Across the Screen” 148), there seems to be a redirection toward such cultural criticism in recent feminist modernist studies, as in Maggie Humm’s *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema* (2003). Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, the authoritative English text on Dulac’s work, suggests in a footnote the parallels between Dulac and Woolf, “not the least of which are the
in a linear narrative progression, her late 1920s films push the limits of lyric narrative film by incorporating techniques of surrealism and creating a visual music.

Dulac’s work joined other experimental films in answering a call to awaken the “unaesthetic eye,” a deplorable somnambulistic condition diagnosed and debated in the twenties (Woolf, “The Cinema” 348). By joining filmmakers in the public debate about the new art form, writers could promote a lyric narrative direction in fiction by championing the cause of the art or avant-garde film. In the journal Close Up, writers and filmmakers—including H.D., Sergei Eisenstein, and Dorothy Richardson—discussed the aesthetic and political potentials of film and the limitations of the predominance of the narrative film, or what is now known as classical Hollywood cinema. In their essays on film, Woolf, H.D., and Benjamin draw inspiration from the techniques of avant-garde films and use the possibilities of cinema as a standpoint to reconsider their own methods. However, Woolf’s investment in developing lyric narrative fiction grounded her discussion of the new art form, whereas H.D. viewed film as a medium she could take up for her own lyric narrative experimentation—not only in writing film criticism but also in working before and behind the camera. Dulac, Woolf, and Benjamin particularly shared an interest in cinema’s psychoanalytic potential. In the mid- to late twenties, paralleling the literary interest in psychoanalysis discussed in previous chapters, the cinema’s avant-garde used the art form to explore the unconscious. By the end of the decade, writers and

‘multiple and contradictory interior impressions’ that form the cornerstone of each woman’s artistic practice,” are “endlessly suggestive” as possibilities for study (138).

2 The excellent introductions in the anthology Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus assess the interplay of artists, psychologists, and filmmakers in this journal and its social context.
filmmakers increasingly related the avant-garde film’s potential for reproducing the workings of the psychoanalytic apparatus to the medium’s power to effect social and political change. These authors’ early theorizations of the medium are precursors of contemporary film theory—particularly Kaja Silverman’s theory of suture and Judith Mayne’s analysis of avant-garde spectatorship. Dulac’s lectures and Woolf’s essays theorizing cinema in the late twenties attempt to make audiences active participants rather than passive receivers who are “sutured” into conventional social narratives.3

Like the lyric narrative fiction examined previously, particularly Woolf’s *The Waves*, Dulac’s films utilize a lyric progression of expansions and counterpoints and suggest the influence of new philosophies of memory and time. Before turning to Dulac’s films, I will contextualize lyric narrative cinema by first locating its lyric roots in the dialectic of formalist and humanist frames of reference—a dialectic embodied by the seashell and observer, as articulated by Paul Valéry. These lyric roots are also traced to Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, a model for both Dulac’s and Woolf’s departures from linear narrative progression to instead tunnel into characters’ psychology. Dulac’s films disruption of conventional narratives, via lyric devices, introduce “us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (Benjamin “The Work of Art” 236). In the next chapter, I will show how the lyric mode of Dulac’s late 1930s films, which seek to both depict and recreate the flow of the unconscious, was advanced by the lyricism of the surrealist movement.

---

3 Following the definition originally offered by Jacques-Alain Miller who “defines suture as that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being” (200), Silverman defines suture as “the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (195).
4.2 The Cinematic Eye: “Mollusk of Reference”

The Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov describes a fugue-like visual form in his 1922 manifesto on the cinema, “We.” Citing “We,” P. Adams Sitney writes that Vertov uses “Kinogram” to describe:

the filmic equivalent of a musical scale which would abstractly delimit the possible figures of filmic construction. There the interval plays a major role: “[……] The intervals carry the action towards its cinematic conclusion. The organization of movement is the organization of its elements, that is to say, of the intervals in a phrase. Each phrase includes an attack, a culmination, and a fall of a movement (in one degree or another). A work is made out of phrases just as a phrase is built up from the intervals of a movement”. (vii-ix)

Although his contemporary Sergei Eisenstein rejected Vertov’s Kino-Eye doctrine, this theorization of the compositional use of montage is reechoed in Eisenstein’s as well as Germaine Dulac’s film theory and work. Dulac’s conception of a cinema that could achieve musical effects, however, departed from the ideological imperative of Soviet montage.

Since Vertov believed the camera eye offered an objective tool of analysis that complemented the objectivity of Marxist analysis, Vertov’s films primarily used newsreel footage for its intervals. Eisenstein, although his theory of montage is quite similar, utilized actors (usually amateurs) and evolved a formalist aesthetics as a more effective propaganda tool. Eisenstein describes his methodology in Battleship Potemkin as

---

4 Benjamin’s use of “distraction” and “contemplation” are an interesting frame to consider Marxist film work. Rather than condemning reception in a state of “distraction,” as readers in an age of unending distraction might expect, Benjamin argues for a dialectic of contemplation and distraction:

For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation. […] the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a
“contrapuntal,” “a hymn” allowing us to now “reach a new era, that of the new psychologyism” (69). In 1934, he reflects on this stage of cinema (the mid- to late twenties) and uses a close-reading of his use of montage in Potemkin to illustrate that “[a]t a certain stage our cinema displayed the same strict responsibility for each shot admitted into a montage sequence as poetry did for each line of verse or music for the regular movement of a fugue” (290). He outlines four methods of cinematic contrapuntal montage: metric, rhythmic, tonal and overtonal. This period of “poetry” gave way to a “second period” “of prose”; thus the third stage in cinema “must be a stage of synthesis” of the “poetic” and “prosaic” (298-9). While an emphasis on synthesizing the poetic and prosaic is precisely Woolf’s language in describing a new direction for modernist fiction, as I have shown in chapters one and two, Eisenstein’s “dialectical art” differs in that, for Eisenstein, intellectual cinema had to achieve a new synthesis culminating in a narrow ideological purpose: “the task of irrevocably inculcating communist ideology into the millions” (16). In contrast to Benjamin’s theorization of a dialectical optic in the cinema which is essentially open-ended—“the shock effect of the film […] cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (“Work of Art” 238), Eisenstein’s Marxist “dialectical approach” and resulting films aspire to an essentially closed circuit of reading (161).

5 Dulac’s films can be similarly mapped according to a first and second avant-garde in French cinema. Dulac’s 1927 The Seashell and the Clergyman marks her entry into the second avant-garde movement. Jacques B. Brunius, in a 1949 essay, offers his “own classification” in which the (French) avant-garde is divided into phases: Louis Delluc represents the “first avant-garde,” and Germaine Dulac, Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, and Marcel L’Herbier represent the “second” (78-79). Brunius groups Dulac’s La Coquille et le Clergyman with a “third phase” of the second avant-garde that receives his particular condemnation in its neglect of profit and popular audiences (86-87).
In “The Montage of Attractions” (1923), Eisenstein describes his technique of a montage of “shocks,” that is “any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence,” as providing “the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion” (34). Similar to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Eisenstein’s essay distinguishes between two modes of viewing for audiences, here defining his role as a filmmaker: “we must direct all our resources towards ensuring that art always exacerbates a current conflict rather than distracting audiences from it” as “the bourgeoisie” does (69). However, Eisenstein’s use of “dialectical” in his methodology is counter to the use of “dialectical optic” by Benjamin as well as “dual vision” by Woolf, H.D., and Dulac, since the latter privilege the reader’s or viewer’s contribution to the creation of a new synthesis, one not narrowly defined by a “final ideological conclusion.” Distinguishing his work from the “impotent” “Cine-Eyes’” impressionistic or “pointillist” technique, Eisenstein writes, “our conception of a work of art […] is first and foremost a tractor ploughing over the audience’s psyche in a particular class context” (62). The self-reflexivity of the texts by Woolf, H.D., Benjamin, and Dulac breaks opens the one-way street of Eisenstein’s work of art by staging the work of art and inviting audiences to examine not only the psyche of the artist, but also the mechanisms producing the work, including their own role as audiences.

Dulac’s work in the twenties was not directed toward the propagandistic end of both Vertov’s and Eisenstein’s work, but she did theorize a similar use of montage as a musical-poetic form. British and French avant-garde filmmakers certainly identified with the Soviet contention that film narrative had increasingly tended to function as an opiate
of the masses (their articles continually refer to a sleeping public that must be roused).

However, whereas Vertov believed Kino-Eye newsreels captured an essential and single “true” reality for waking the masses and Eisenstein believed his compositions produced a monologic reading, ploughing a particular ideology into the minds’ of the masses, British and French avant-garde filmmakers tended to emphasize the subjective nature of reality and privileged films that allowed for a plurality of readings from an awakened and engaged audience. Nonetheless, the participants in this continuum of avant-garde filmwork, extending from abstract art for art’s sake to a ploughing propaganda, share as a chief interest the relationship between the camera’s eye and the human eye. Here I will discuss how both writers and filmmakers conceptualized these similar apparatuses and the space between the projected text on the screen and the text that becomes part of the “screen of my brain” (Woolf D 3:114).

In the previous chapter, I discussed H.D.’s and Freud’s use of the seashell as a metaphor for the relationship of the unconscious and preconscious, the self and the shell it secretes as a barrier interface with the experiential world. As a common modernist analogy of both subjectivity and psychology as well as the negotiation of a formalist aesthetics, this metaphor has continued relevance in analyzing Germaine Dulac’s psychological portrait in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and the structure of *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. Randall Stevenson, in his overview of literary modernism, has enumerated many of the crustaceans of modernist novels—in the works of Lawrence, Woolf, Joyce, and Eliot, for example—as signs of reification between machines and human beings. “As human beings grow empty within a shell-like exterior, shelled creatures like the crab come to seem more nearly human. A similar reciprocal exchange
of qualities occurs between machines and human beings” (Stevenson 75). Although a literary device in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, reification in Karl Marx’s theorization “is also a real condition of modern labour, forced to make itself into a usable commodity that can be exploited for wages”; modernist literature tends “not only to reflect or show awareness of reifying forces in contemporary life, but to find means, at least in imagination to compensate for them” (Stevenson 75-6). Stevenson relates these arthropodic metaphors to modernists’ new narrative form: modernist literature’s inward turn to “the oceanic spaces within itself” is a consequence of modernists facing a “sea of troubles” in the aftermath of war (82). A more precise (or obsessive) analysis of the use of the metaphor, however, suggests that the proliferation of crustacean analogies should be understood on a continuum. At one extreme, a turn toward pure formalism that transcends the crises of the 1920s and 30s; this permutation of the analogy is not unlike the complete reification of the human as machine, seen particularly in Soviet “Machine Age” art (such as constructivism after 1928) that mobilized the human as machine for conquering that “sea of troubles.” At the other extreme is the humanist use of the metaphor, as in Forster’s “crablike sidewise” development of the mind in *Aspects of the Novel* (173), Woolf’s

---

6 Tyrus Miller cites Wyndham Lewis’s preference for “the ‘ossature’ and ‘shell’ of the living organism [...] over its soft, fluxive innards” in *Men Without Art* and compares this imagery with Freud’s depiction of consciousness as a shield in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (49), a parallel Lewis certainly would not have appreciated. Miller’s contention that “For Freud, consciousness, in contrast to traditional images of it as active, living soul, is a rigidified, deadened filter against experience—a hard outer shell, sacrificed to preserve life and prevent breaching of the inner organism by all but the most violent of shocks” (50), disregards the dynamic process inherent in the formation and reformation of that shell. In *Scrutinies II* (1931), “The Lyric Impulse in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot,” critic Alec Brown evokes both Lewis and F.R. Leavis in finding T.S. Eliot’s technique of citation (or montage) suggestive of the death of the human subject: “I find that the scraps of quotation in the various languages he knows and the display of allusion is but a carapaceous covering, like that of the tortoise, containing itself no vital organs, but being merely an exaggerated form of protection” (38).
opalescent-shelled crab circling in vain to climb out of its bucket in *Jacob’s Room*, and H.D.’s analogy of the poet as “the shell-fish / oyster, clam, molluse” in *Trilogy*’s “The Walls Do Not Fall” (8-9).

Paul Valéry’s “Man and the Sea Shell” (1937) is an essay that, like his 1929 notes on his essay “Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci,” attempts to analyze the artist’s own process. In analyzing the writer analyzing the form of a seashell or the writer analyzing the method of a genius like da Vinci, Valéry surveys both a formalist and humanist mode of art. His self-reflexive meditation outlines some of the dialectics artists such as Dulac negotiated in creating a lyric narrative art. Valéry represents the artist’s consciousness admiring the seashell’s “flawless progression of form” which “seems to create its own time”; the formal progression (which the artist sees in the shell) is valued for its lyric departure from man’s linear construction of time (111). Valéry writes that we admire its combination of “rhythm” and “indivisible movement. It is like seeing music. The correspondence of ornaments on successive spirals suggests a counterpoint, while the continuity sustains the main theme of the rotation of the surface” (111). This synesthesia encapsulated in the seashell, “seeing music,” is the goal of Germaine Dulac’s lyric narrative film *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, a goal that Virginia Woolf posits as well in her essay “The Cinema.”

As if articulating not only the form of Dulac’s film but also the film’s representation of the desires of its clergyman, Valéry writes, “We yearn for a profound geometry, a very exact knowledge,” revealed by science and artistic feeling, “which, taken together, might enable us to isolate some simple basic principle of natural morphology” (111). As I discussed in the previous chapter in the analogies of the
psychic apparatus and elaboration of topographies by Freud, Benjamin, and H.D., and in Woolf’s dialectic of a fundamental (granite) structure in counterpoint to the flux of life (rainbow) in chapter one, Valéry shares a desire for and explores that desire for a primal, yet lyrical, underlying structure. In contrast to the modernist crustaceans Stevenson discusses, the shell pondered by Valéry’s narrator becomes an analogy of the lyric moment, or, in Benjamin’s terms, dialectical image, in relation to the narrative ground of the observing subject. “Like a pure sound or a melodic system of pure sounds in the midst of noises, so a crystal, a flower, a sea shell stand out from the common disorder of perceptible things. For us they are privileged objects” (Valéry 112).

Valéry argues that such privileged objects fascinate us because of their dialectics, their “strange union” of “order and fantasy, invention and necessity, law and exception” (112). Our fascination is with the appearance of their structure, moreover because we do not understand the methods of its formation. According to Valéry, the mystery of this suspension of dialectics in the shell’s form defies both language and mathematics. Like the dialectical image in Benjamin’s works, the presence of the other to the artist in Woolf’s and H.D.’s works, or the palimpsestuous text or montage to the composer, the shell defamiliarizes, returns the observing subject “to the beginning of knowledge”: “I am following the example of the man who one day made tabula rasa. I look for the first time at this thing I have found” (Valéry 117). Likening the words “sonnet” and “fugue” to “conch” and “porcelain,” these “names of shells” illustrate that the notion of the “useful” is constrained to man’s intellectual sphere (119); what defies “use” and our language is imbued with a mystical charge, one that can set off a lyrical departure to an alternate standpoint for the perceiving subject. The seashell’s growth “according to the ineluctable
theme of the spiral, all the components which the no less ineluctable form of the human act has taught us to consider and define separately, are indistinct and indivisible: the energy, the time, the material, the connections” all suggest that “[w]ithout the slightest effort life creates a very ‘generalized’ relativity” in this “Mollusk of Reference” (Valéry 130-1).

According to Valéry, our philosophies are thus all “an eternal quest for the formula that will efface the difference” between our fluctuation between “the world of bodies” and the world of the “mind,” to “reconcile” two divergent frames of reference—each with their own order, time, and mode of transformation (134). Lyric narrative, which often stages this philosophical quest for a reconciliation between the time-bound world of bodies and a timeless realm, does not ultimately “efface the difference” (Valéry 134) nor does it bring one to a “final ideological conclusion” (Eisenstein 34). Rather, lyric narrative—a back and forth movement between the dialectics of timelessness and progressing time, involuntary and voluntary memory, the death- and life-instincts—suspends these dialectics. In the lyric moment of a narrative, the reader/viewer, character, and/or author sees the relativity of these frames of reference and their mutual tension. The suspended moment offers no clear, singular conclusion, but opens up a vantage for the reader/viewer to participate in “reading” such tensions and its underlying structures—“seeing music.”

Valéry’s meditations are also ultimately inconclusive. Like H.D.’s Raymonde in “Murex,” Valéry figures himself a “Hamlet, picking up a skull” in examining and casting away his seashell (134). Dulac’s film, unfolding as well from the meditation of “the human eye” on “this little, hollow, spiral-shaped calcareous body,” presents itself as a site
for exploring the relativity of our frames of reference, our desire for a unifying formula, and ultimately its image of the seashell “summons up a number of thoughts, all inconclusive. . . .” (Valéry 135). Whether the vision achieved in the timeless realm of the lyric moment can lead to political action in prosaic reality is a question left disturbingly open as well.

Susan Gubar, in “The Echoing Spell of H.D.’s Trilogy,” writes of H.D.’s use of the shell as a metaphor for the poet: “Imprisoned within what amounts to a beautiful but inescapable tomb of form, the mollusk will not be cracked open or digested, but instead remains ‘small, static, limited’” (301).7 Indeed, this is the paradox H.D. reflects on in the “Murex” story of Palimpsest, the solipsism of the inviolate form of the imagist poem. As her character Raymonde’s recurring meditations on Browning’s murex (a mollusk prized for the production of dye) suggests, writing comes out of reading (fishing, cracking, distilling) and vice versa. The poet depends upon the reader to fish up and crack the murex (poem) she has laboriously formed out of her own interaction with the outside world. An engaged reader is essential in extracting the purple dye. The image-plots of H.D.’s Trilogy (for example the shell and cocoon, star and darkness) are rehearsed in her earlier lyric narratives in prose; the narrative of the succession of these images in Trilogy suggests a lyric construction of the poet’s struggle to digest and construct a form, tentative transcendence out of form into essence and vision, and the necessary fall—back into the contingent world.

7 Edmund Wilson concluded Axel’s Castle by contrasting Rimbaud’s life as having the power to move us for its utter rejection of Europe in contrast to the other modernists he has surveyed who were just as disillusioned with their world but “had remained in it and managed to hold their places in it by excreting, like patient molluscs, iridescent shells of literature” (319).
In Paul Valéry’s essay and H.D.’s “Murex” and Trilogy, the thinker is both the creative investigator (the person walking the shore in search of the shell) and the object of investigation (the mollusk itself). These self-reflexive meditations take up Proust’s dictum, described in the “Overture” of Swann’s Way in Marcel’s reaction to tasting the “scallop-shell of pastry” (50): he questions how to make his mind “discover the truth” when, facing an “abyss of uncertainty, […] the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region though which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create” (49). For these modernists, that “abyss of uncertainty” is the site of creation, and the challenge of the quest is the analysis of that “dark region” and the creation of “equipment” that would avail. Proust evokes both musical and cinematic analogues (the “Overture,” the magic lantern and bioscope horse) for exploring the new direction for fiction that his work undertakes, and it is indeed music and cinema (and the model of Proust) that provide frames of reference for subsequent artists of lyric narrative.

In “The Image of Proust” (1929), Benjamin argues that Proust’s writing is “never isolated, rhetorical, or visionary; carefully heralded and securely supported, it bears a fragile, precious reality: the image” (205). For Proust, the image assuages both curiosity and a homesickness “for the world distorted in the state of resemblance, a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through” (205). Proust, both the fisherman and the fisherman’s sea (Benjamin’s metaphor), uses the image to explore two frames of reference—time in its “space-bound” form and the “convoluted” (not “boundless”) time of “remembrance within” (211). “Proust’s world” then, which is a “vortex” for the reader’s world, is “the domain of the correspondances”; the romantics first
comprehended them “and Baudelaire embraced them most fervently, but Proust was the only one who managed to reveal them in our lived life” through the work of involuntary memory and Proust’s “method” of “actualization, not reflection” (211-2).⁸ As we shall see, Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* similarly reveals the Baudelairean *correspondances* of everyday life; moreover, her *The Seashell and the Clergyman* attempts to actualize, rather than reflect, the domain of the *correspondances* with the viewer.

According to Benjamin, Proust’s work is also unique in its evocation to the reader: “anyone who wishes to surrender knowingly to the innermost overtones in this work” must surrender to involuntary memory, become fisherman as well, and cast “his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu*” to thus gain a sense of the “whole” of the catch Proust’s sentences are an effort to raise, an amorphous and formless weight (214). This shift from “author and plot” to the net of memory means a new form, lyric narrative, as well as a new object for the work of art. In his epigram to “The Work of Art,” Benjamin quotes Valéry who argues that, given the changes in our understanding of time, space, and matter, and the “amazing growth of our techniques” in the fine arts in the last twenty years, “[w]e must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself” (217). Itself a medium exploring the potentials of lyric in narrative, cinema is of course one of the great technical innovations that

---

⁸ Benjamin’s analysis of Proust’s “image” links his study of mimesis (in which he heralds a return of magic to the mimesis of modernity in modernist art—both literature and cinema) and surrealism. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) expands on these points, making striking connections between Baudelaire’s lyric prose and flâneur and Proust’s involuntary memory.
transformed the art of fiction—and indeed its techniques provided a model for fiction to explore artistic invention itself.

4.3 The Eye in the Street: Woolf “Street Haunting”

Attuned to the changes in the last twenty years that Valéry describes, Virginia Woolf’s practice of artistic invention was certainly inspired by a desire to transform the techniques of literature. The essay-story “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” illustrates Woolf’s intent to carry the Proustian project forward and suggests a “cinematic” style.9 I want to first examine how this piece takes as its method and object a cinematic exploration of the perceiving self. I will then suggest that this lyric narrative method utilizes the Baudelairean model of the flâneur and correspondances (also the subject of Benjamin’s writing) in order to resist an abstract formalism as well as the soporific effects of conventional narrative.

Written in 1930, Woolf’s “Street Haunting” opens with the line, “No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil” (CE 4: 155). This opening line’s brilliance lies not only in its humor but also in its precise prefiguring of the text that follows. The lead pencil is the “object” that “we” take up as an excuse for “rambling the streets of London” (CE 4: 155). Furthermore, throughout the piece, Woolf shows how

9 Although Woolf denigrated Compton Mackenzie’s novels with the term “cinematic,” in that “one picture must follow another without stopping, for if it stopped and we had to look at it we should be bored” (qtd. in Kellman 469), today critics such as Leslie Hankins have praised Woolf’s own work as cinematic. In this study, I generally use the term “cinematic” in reference to fiction to refer to technical innovations that the medium enabled rather than to Woolf’s pejorative use of “cinematic novel” which refers to the “literary” style of classical Hollywood cinema. See also Lia M. Hotchkiss’s “Writing the Jump Cut: Mrs. Dalloway in the Context of Cinema.”
the object or image (first, the lead pencil) is the point of departure from the prosaic surface of the street into the lyric realm of fancy. Implicitly, “Street Haunting” argues that while no one has yet “felt passionately towards a lead pencil,” the passionate vision of the poet-flâneur on the journey toward such a mundane object may reveal the worthwhile departures by which a narrative can proceed. While critics have argued that Woolf’s essay evidences a flâneuserie, her narrator is scrupulously un-gendered or androgynous, as Leslie Hankins has noted, only sharing the Baudelairean flâneur’s purposelessness (“Selling Out(Siders)”19). Woolf’s portrayal of the flight of the mind in the city streets kindles a passion for a different kind of writing.

Choosing an evening hour in winter, Woolf’s narrator draws the reader into their “adventure” with the repetition of the pronoun “we” and an experience readers are likely to share: the sense of “irresponsibility” and the shedding of “the self our friends know us by” when walking in a city in the evening after the solitude of our rooms (CE 4: 155). In the street, we are freed from the “objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own

10 This argument draws due attention to the fact that Baudelaire’s flâneur and his streetwalking observations are enabled by his male gender. In “Flanerie by Motor Car?,” Makiko Minow-Pinkney, compares Woolf’s “Street Haunting” with “Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car.” Minow-Pinkney notes that both describe an experience of sensations in modernity and share “the dominance of visual faculty and relinquishment of the thinking self” (252). Further, for both the setting at twilight “because the mode of perception which is going to be explored and enjoyed (while ‘the brain sleeps’) belongs to the world of dream, the realm of the unconscious, irresponsible, aberrant, off the normal straight line of daily life” (252). However, “Street Haunting” also emphasizes the necessity of another frame of reference, the wakened brain and thinking self, in order for those sensations to be “explored and enjoyed.”

11 Hankins compares Benjamin’s “A Berlin Childhood ca. 1900” to Woolf’s “Street Haunting.” Whereas Woolf’s narrator is cloaked in androgyny, Hankins argues that Benjamin’s narrator is embodied as a male subject: Woolf’s flaneuse differs in gender from the traditional flâneur who was “defined by his masculinity and (until Benjamin’s neo-flâneur) his lack of purpose,” and Woolf’s flâneuse is a “feminist” with “a revolutionary agenda in taking to the streets,” as in A Room of One’s Own (20).
temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience,” and the narrator’s example of a “bowl on the mantelpiece” unfolds into memories of a trip to Mantua (CE 4: 155). Echoing Proust, the narrator notes that these variegated, distinct memories are all reclaimed by the bowl; the “moment [in memory] was stabilized, stamped like a coin” by the object or image (CE 4: 156). The image in Woolf’s piece functions as Benjamin describes its function in Proust’s, as a “bridge to the dream” (“Image of Proust” 204). The image, actualizing rather than reflecting, “bears a fragile, precious reality” (204), and indeed a kind of currency for the writer. Woolf’s examination of the power of the image shares with Proust’s the implications of memory and habit (as in the Mantuan bowl), and, as we will see, shares with Benjamin’s reading of Proust the power of the unfamiliar image that “breaks through” the “world distorted in the state of resemblance” and liberates the subject’s lyric imagination into flights of mimetic creation (205).

Outside of our rooms, a transformation takes place and the contingent self is eclipsed by an organ: “The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkled and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (CE 4: 156). This metaphor of “a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye,” on the one hand, captures the desirability of cracking the constructed self (the preconscious filter) to get at the meat of existence. On the other hand, it also captures the uneasy sense of exposure that the perceiving subject is subject to when beyond the safe enclosures of habit and identity in one’s room. The move of Woolf’s narrator back and forth between the habitual constructed self (the shell) and the meat of unmediated experience (the central oyster of perceptiveness), enables the narrator to discover quite a
few pearls, or “treasure” (CE 4: 156). For indeed, the street, “at once revealed and obscured,” brings the narrator to the “beautiful” (CE 4: 156).

The text also evokes the new directions that innovations in cinema provoked in fiction. A parallel to Woolf’s metaphor of the “enormous eye” exposed to the possible shocks of the street is found in Luis Buñuel’s 1928 surrealist film, Un Chien Andalou. In the infamous opening montage, a shot of a cloud eclipsing a full moon is followed by a match cut of a woman’s eye being slit open by a straight razor in close up. The setting and images of Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” however, are less like Buñuel’s film than Dziga Vertov’s Man With a Movie Camera, in which Vertov intercuts images of the camera’s lens and opening shutter with a human eye opening. Vertov’s 1929 film is a city symphony, a day in the life of a Soviet city, and is also a film about its own filming. No single character comes to the fore; rather, the film encourages viewers to identify with the cameramen, editors, and projectionists who appear as the filming of the city progresses. Unlike previous city symphony films, Vertov ends his portrait of a city in the evening as the city dwellers go to the cinema and are shown as engaged spectators of a film. In his theory of the objective “Kino-eye” that was to replace the fallible human eye, Vertov held that the film’s rhythm should avoid the psychological since such films

---

12 In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin uses the metaphor of exposure and shell as well. He identifies the “unarmed eye” with the cult value of aura and reproducibility with the potential: “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura,” which “is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (223). Compare also with H.D.’s “The Walls Do Not Fall,” in which the poet as shell-fish snaps shut its jaws against the “invasion of the limitless” and entreats the reader to “be indigestible” and live within, in order to finally beget “selfless, / that pearl-of-great-price” (9). In Woolf’s later essay, “The Leaning Tower,” she parodies “theories about writers”: “To the psychologists a writer is an oyster; feed him on gritty facts, irritate him with ugliness, and by way of compensation, as they call it, he will produce a pearl” (CE 2: 162-3)
interfere with portraying man’s kinship with the machine. Despite Vertov’s avowed ideological intent, *Man With a Movie Camera* is an open, plural text that privileges the viewer’s engagement through its self-reflexive montages and musical structure. Indeed, his film was condemned by Eisenstein for privileging formalist aesthetics over ideological content and persuasion (a denunciation Eisenstein would himself face in the late 1930s). Woolf’s “Street Haunting” is similar to Vertov’s film in that it captures the life of a London street in winter while simultaneously commenting on the methods of fiction and exploring the relationship of perception to identity. However, Woolf’s text interrogates the “objective” cinema eye (favored by Vertov) severed from psychological depth.

Woolf’s narrator finds maintaining the viewpoint of the “enormous eye” difficult, and the text sets up a rhythm vacillating between a linear, surface movement of the eye observing the street and a vertical movement of the mind’s imagination making new images and *correspondances* from what is observed. The narrator protests, “But, after all, we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure” (*CE* 4: 156). Woolf echoes Dulac here in distinguishing between an active, diving mind and a somnolent eye, “the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (*CE* 4: 156). When the narrator is only the enormous eye floating “down a stream,” absorbing the “beautiful” of the London street, the mind again departs for a pastoral fantasy of the countryside and must be reminded, “But this is London” (*CE* 4: 56). When the eye observes a clerk and a woman in lighted windows, each image initiates departures into possible narratives as the mind catches “at some branch or root”
and so must be reprimanded: “But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves” (CE 4: 157).

Setting up a disingenuous argument against the mind and seemingly in favor of the objective eye alone, Woolf uses the same language as in her essay “The Cinema.” Woolf ultimately makes clear that the move back and forth between the two frames enables a productive, creative tension. Although “the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty,” it seems that beauty is not enough: “The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships” (CE 4: 157). The eye may receive the overwhelming shock of beauty, but it requires the mind’s questioning, repeated going over, and transmutation in order to transform the eye’s shocks into lasting pearls.13

Woolf’s narrator now allows the eye and the mind (“some duskier chamber of the being”) to work together—and indeed, this is signaled by the narrator’s turning into a boot shop—a site that is removed from the flow of the street, but is not the familiar room of habit (CE 4: 157). The mind asks, “What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?” as the eye observes a female dwarf enter between two other “giantesses” (CE 4: 157). The closely observed other provokes a series of speculations, an attempt by the narrator to try on another’s shoes, so to speak, as the woman tries on shoes and is (to the narrator) caught

13 Jean Epstein, whose French narrative avant-garde work is often associated with Dulac, similarly described the camera lens as “an eye endowed with inhuman analytical properties […] it sees in the human face and gestures traits that we, burdened with sympathies and antipathies, habits and inhibitions, no longer know how to see” (Abel 292). Dulac agreed with this assessment, and like Woolf, emphasized the subjective presence of the author that transforms what the camera eye captures.
up in her performance. This image and the mind’s psychological tunneling into the other’s character has affected the eye’s frame of reference when it reenters the street; “the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street had now conformed” (CE 4: 158). The mind revels in relating the various figures around her in the “obscure angles” of a carnivalesque to their corresponding figures encountered in the London street.

Moreover, Woolf’s narrator enjoys the conventional flâneur’s distance of “bourgeois security” (Hankins, “Selling Out(Siders)” 19). The narrator effaces these individuals—the poor, disabled, and racially-others observed—by supplanting their identities with their “curious trades” in curious objects: “gold-beaters, accordion-pleaters, cover buttons, […] traffic in cups without saucers, china umbrella handles” (CE 4: 159). However, Woolf positions her narrator as such a flâneur, happily making new things out of old and discovering correspondances between the outmoded objects and the marginal subjects, in order to critique that security and standpoint, a “bourgeois security” her readers would as readily share as she herself. “They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building” (CE 4: 159). Caught away in the poetic transmutation of the “deformed” into a curious carnival, the reader experiences the same grounding shock as the narrator in facing these prosaic sights: “At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is
asked which is never answered” (*CE* 4: 159). The eye’s frame of reference is jarred, and the narrator counterpoints the “gilt necks of the proud swans” supporting bourgeois sofas with “women laid on doorsteps” (*CE* 4: 159). Not only does Woolf expose her audience to a shock that the narrator’s creative musings have ill prepared them for, but also she exposes the narrator’s own liability in attempting to speak of/for the other. Recognizing the impossibility of speaking for the other, Woolf calls our attention to the narrator’s shortcomings. While this self-reflexive critique is welcome, it cannot resolve the unanswered question; the reader is asked to sympathize less with the hungry Jew or women laid on doorsteps than with the narrator who has been disarmed of the protective covering of language.

Repeating her argument from *A Room of One’s Own* (the need to weave the story between the poetic and prosaic in fiction and the need for physical and psychic space to write at all), Woolf’s narrator emphasizes the need to be outside of the economies of the street in order to appreciate both critically and aesthetically its grotesque injustices and its beauty: “With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (*CE* 4: 160). Neither the destitute nor the bourgeois consumers in cafes or shops whom the narrator has observed can achieve this dual vision. Pearls glimpsed in an antique dealer’s window provoke the narrator to make up (and reflect on the process of making up) a story of one’s life being transformed by the pearls, of standing on a balcony overlooking Mayfair in June: “we sport with the moment and preen

---

14 Woolf is here close to Eisenstein in her ideological critique; however, the distinction I would make is that Woolf frames the question, but it is a question that she does not answer, nor does she absolve her own privileged status.
our feathers in it lightly, as we stand on the balcony” (*CE* 4: 160). This lyric departure is reprimanded with the familiar “But”: “But what could be more absurd?” (*CE* 4: 160). These two frames of reference provoke a questioning of whether the prosaic or poetic is the “true self”:

Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither […] but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? (*CE* 4: 161).

Although the narrator clearly inclines toward the latter, “[c]ircumstances compel unity” (*CE* 4: 161). Thus, when the “good citizen” returns home from an interlude of imagining in “some narcotic dream” during the walk between work and home and opens his door, he “must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky […]” (*CE* 4: 161, 163). “But here,” with a turn into a second-hand book-shop, the narrator interrupts this probing of the paradox of the constructed unity of the self. Books, particularly the “wild” and “homeless” second-hand books, join the other privileged objects and images of the street as portals into another frame of reference (*CE* 4: 161). The second-hand book encloses the potential of “sudden capricious friendships with the unknown and the vanished” (*CE* 4: 163). Like Benjamin in his essay “Unpacking My Library” (1931),

15 Woolf’s narrator reveals a correspondence between the infinite number of books and the flux of others one interacts

---

15 In this piece, Benjamin uses the trope of a book collector unpacking his library and reflecting on the methods of collecting and the objects of his collection in order to reveal his character; the self is housed in the collection. Benjamin writes, “what I am really concerned with is giving you some insight into the relationship of a book collector to his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection. […] there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order” (60).
with in the street: “one is forced to glimpse and nod and move on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime” (CE 4: 163). Woolf’s narrator thus expresses the need to order the flux of experience and the realization that any imposed order is an illusion that must blot out any number of other possible narratives or lyric departures. Lia Hotchkiss writes that “[d]iscontinuity editing in both cinema and Woolf’s fiction achieves the same paradoxical unity [trans and fixed] through the associative cutting that implies a governing subjectivity able to coalesce individual characters’ experience into a faceted whole” (139). However, Woolf’s fiction pushes the paradox further by calling into question that implied governing subjectivity, a move which both empowers and unsettles the reader.

“But,” this flux, “the velocity and abundance of life,” the narrator reminds us, is tamed by “a little rod about the length of one’s finger […] ‘Really I must—really I must’” (CE 4: 163). Woolf’s “little rod” refers to the coherent “I” composed and ordered by “the rod of duty” and habit (CE 4: 164). Duty, “one always must,” imposes, as “it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself”; indeed the object (the lead pencil) enables a departure from duty and the coherent self, but it is also a rod that redirects the narrator to the need for a coherent narrative progression and object of pursuit (CE 4: 164). Having purchased the pencil, the narrator returns home, where the “old possessions, the old prejudices” will again enclose the perceiving self (CE 4: 166). Walking in the deserted streets, the narrator reviews the lives encountered on the adventure:

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a
few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washer-woman, a publican, a street singer. (CE 4: 165)

Woolf emphasizes that these lyric departures into the psychology of others is indeed “an illusion,” and that knowledge of the other is ultimately impossible. However, the imaginative venture is valuable. By deviating from “the straight lines of personality” into “the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men” (CE 4: 165), the narrator finds not “the horror, the horror.” Rather, the shocks of modernity received by the enormous eye provoke the mind and are re-cognized, through multiple layers and frames, as beauty; the attempt to know the other is “the greatest of pleasures” and street haunting “the greatest of adventures” (CE 4: 166).

Itself a hybrid of essay and fiction, Woolf’s text interrogates conventional fictions, both literary narratives and the socially constructed narratives that determine the self. Woolf’s figuration of the “enormous eye,” which remains always on the surface and requires the mind to sleep, critiques the “materialist” writers “concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (Tiessen 77). This portrayal also critiques the futurists or constructivists who see the self as analogous to the machine-body. In Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” existing as merely an eye—whether in an abstract formalism or “materialist” realism—must be avoided. However, the mind separate from the eye is not privileged either. Leaving the comfortable solitude of one’s room and the socially constructed self is necessary. The objects and images of the street provide both shocks for innervating the mind as well as a harsh corrective to the mind’s romantic lyrical departures.

---

16 Benjamin uses “innervation” in his essay “Surrealism.” Miriam Bratu Hansen argues that Benjamin uses the term to suggest the productive internalization of a new technology. The OED’s definition sites both a physiological definition (“supply of nerve-force from a nerve-centre
4.4 Germaine Dulac: Feminism in the First Avant-Garde

In film, Germaine Dulac’s work evidences a similar hybrid of the *flâneur’s* cinematic eye and poet’s psychological tunneling. With its house-bound protagonist who depends upon objects and images for her imaginative departures, Dulac’s *La Sourante Mme Beudet (The Smiling Madame Beudet)* particularly offers an interesting counterpart to Woolf’s essay. Critics of both Dulac (Sandy Flitterman-Lewis) and Woolf (Leslie Hankins) have noted the evocative similarities of their works.\(^{17}\) My intent is to explore how the development of cinematic lyric narrative in Dulac’s films and film theory parallels Woolf’s development in fiction and literary theory.

As William Van Wert has noted, Dulac’s film style moved from psychological realism and symbolism, also called “impressionist” by Dulac, during the early 1920s, to surrealism and the transposition of musical structures into film at the end of the decade, and to unconventional documentaries in the 1930s. Like Woolf, Dulac continually developed her technique, testing new methods, discarding what had been tried, and synthesizing techniques from other disciplines. Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* marks a significant departure from conventional narrative cinema. The film uses a conventional narrative structure (introduction, complication, resolution) but this narrative progression is secondary to the psychological portrait of Madame Beudet. Dulac uses intertexts (Baudelaire, *Faust*, a popular magazine, Debussy), impressionistic point of view shots, and fantasy sequences to reveal her character’s subjectivity, and uses *mise-
en-scène and the framed image to illuminate the patriarchal structures that enclose her. There is a striking similarity between Woolf’s characteristic technique in “Street Haunting” and Dulac’s rhythmic movement between the narrative progression (which some have described as conventionally “theatrical”) and lyrical departures (provoked by objects observed by Madame Beudet and in intervals of authorial omniscience).

In comparing The Smiling Madame Beudet (released in 1923) with Dulac’s much more experimental film The Seashell and the Clergyman (1927), a clarification of terms is necessary. Dulac’s films, like Woolf’s fiction, can be described on a lyric narrative continuum (where some texts privilege the narrative mode and others the lyric mode).18 Richard Abel’s reassessment of the terms and history of narrative and avant-garde form in French cinema, French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1929, is a useful basis for the comparative analysis undertaken here. Abel’s analysis surveys the wide variety of commercial narrative film genres and contexts of this period. Dulac’s films span these genres—from the Spanish film La Fête espagnole (1920), the serial Gossette (1923), the modern studio spectacular Ame d’artiste (1925), the historical reconstruction Le Diable dans la ville (1925), to the fantasy L’Invitation au voyage (1927). Abel emphasizes the mutability of generic boundaries and shows that Dulac’s films, particularly those she directed independently, tend to integrate a number of genres. For example, The Smiling

18 In Living to Tell about It, James Phelan notes that the category of ‘lyric narrative’ can be profitably broken down into more specific subcategories that would describe different combinations of static situation, retrospective or present tense narration, and audience engagement, as well as combinations in which lyric dominated but then gives way to narrative and vice versa. (158)
Madame Beudet strategically evokes the bourgeois melodrama, the realist film, and the criminal drama.

However, of particular interest to this study is Abel’s attention to the much smaller faction of the French film industry that conceived of cinema as “a cultural product, an art” rather than as solely “a spectacle entertainment—a commercial product” (241). Abel sets out to redefine the French narrative avant-garde, a term which encompasses a range of alternate film practices and means of exchange, spanning those who advocated a “pure cinema” to those who situated the avant-garde “within the context of a narrative cinema” (241). Dulac advocated both positions in her film theory, and her practice of expanding the alternate film network—“an interrelated network of film critics, cinema journals, ciné-clubs, and specialized cinemas” (Abel 241)—proved an integral support in the evolution of the narrative avant-garde. Just as Woolf, in her self-styled role of “common reader,” saw criticism as a means of drawing a wider audience into modernist literature, Dulac saw the development of independent cinema journals (unparalleled in England, Germany, or even America) and inclusive ciné-clubs as key in encouraging “an informed audience that would support advances in film art” (Abel 251). In contrast to Soviet writers who developed a number of cinema journals in the

---

19 Abel writes that the first ciné-club grew out of the informal gatherings of artists, writers, musicians, critics, actors and professional filmmakers at the Café Napolitain in 1920,” a group dubbed C.A.S.A. (Club des amis du septième art) by Ricciotto Canudo in April 1921 (252). The club progressed from dinner speeches and discussions at Canudo’s apartment to well attended expositions, lecture tours, and a prolifération of clubs in the cities and provinces by the end of the decade. Dulac toured and gave major lectures sponsored by C.A.S.A. in 1924. This evolution parallels Woolf’s own participation first in small gatherings of the “Memoir Club,” which included a close circle of friends of artists, writers, and philosophers, at the turn of the century. By the late twenties, Woolf spoke before a much larger audience of a working women’s college, delivering a version of *A Room of One’s Own.*
mid- to late twenties that focused on film as a tool for social change, French authors focused first on drawing audiences into an alternate cinema network and secondarily on film’s role in inciting social change.

Perhaps as a result of these priorities, the French narrative avant-garde film shares with Woolf’s and H.D.’s modernist literature the misapprehension that its purpose was art for art’s sake, an enduring assumption that such authors turned toward a rarified aesthetic of the few and rather than a social politics dedicated to the many. However, these authors’ concern for their audience proves equal to and inextricable from their concern for their art. Dulac, supported by Jean Epstein and Marcel L’Herbier, organized a major series of lectures by the Ciné-club in 1925-1926 at one of the several Paris theatres committed to alternative cinema. The series proved so successful that they added Friday evening lectures and extended the series for a month. Moreover, the audiences filling the theatres were not comprised of an intellectual elite, as an October 1925 article in Cinéa-
 Ciné-pour-tous reported: “So Mme. Germaine Dulac’s last film project, La Folie des vaillants … received an enthusiastic response from a mass cosmopolitan public” (qtd. in Abel 256).

Although the ciné-club movement primarily appealed to an intellectual and aesthetic elite (“mass” and “public” is modified by “cosmopolitan” in the reviewer’s article), authors such as Dulac and members of the club “Les Amis de Spartacus” pushed hard against a self-perpetuating snobbery. On November 13, 1926 at the alternative theatre Artistic-Cinéma, Léon Moussinac and Germaine Dulac arranged a Ciné-Club de France screening of Eisenstein’s banned film, The Battleship Potemkin (1925) (Abel 264). The incredible success of this screening in addition to the success of a workers’
cooperative in taking over a popular cinema to screen “uncommercial” films and
newsreels encouraged Moussinac to organize “Les Amis de Spartacus,” a ciné-club
devoted to countering the “dictatorship of money” by banding together to assure
distribution of international films and create a mass cinema movement (qtd. in Abel 265).
The Spartacus group, however, was disbanded in October 1928 when the Paris chief of
police threatened action against its overt politicization and screenings of Soviet films
(Abel 266). Until the end of the 1920s, less overt resistance thrived in cinemas dedicated
to alternative cinema and sustained such films by turning to cooperative film production
and distribution. Dulac led the Ciné-Club de France for several years and was a leader in
establishing the first international Fédération des Ciné-Clubs in 1929.

Dulac’s politics are implicit in her efforts on behalf of the narrative avant-garde.
What is unique in Dulac’s prominence in this movement, besides the fact of her sex, is
her consistent attention to using technological and aesthetic innovations to examine the
frustration, objectification, and oppression of women in her films. Dulac is also notable
for turning a critical eye on the tendency to denigrate popular films; while Dulac certainly
believed in the importance of the avant-garde, she argued that the art film served a larger
purpose and must be viewed as only one type of film practice. Dulac’s theoretical
writing attests to her need to elevate cinema as the seventh art among “cosmopolitan”

---

20 This difficult stance of championing a new, alternative aesthetic while critiquing structures of
privilege and elitism also appears in Woolf’s essays on fiction. Leslie Hankins has written of
Woolf’s essay on film, “The Cinema,” that her circular argument reinforces, to a certain extent,
the “traditional hegemonic order, which placed high literary art, high cinematic art, and popular
culture in a descending order of value” by denigrating mere movies (“Across the Screen” 176).
Nonetheless, Woolf sided with artists and writers of film in feminist journals, such as Collette,
Germaine Dulac, Dorothy Richardson, and Bryher, who acknowledged and attempted to negotiate
this paradox. The interests of these modernist women in cinema “were obviously not the same
university-linked avant-garde as those male-defined avant-garde groups mapped out by literary
historians” (“Across the Screen” 177).
audiences in order to sustain the medium’s potential for alternatives to hegemonic narrative film, while, in keeping with her socialist and feminist beliefs, simultaneously maintaining its status as an art for the masses. In 1927, Dulac created and edited the journal *Schémas*, fated to survive for only one issue given its idealistic objectives. This review would be dedicated to the future possibilities of cinema: “We have the right and the responsibility to prepare the future […] it will enable us to perfect our art” (qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 66). Side by side with this vision of a workshop for perfecting the seventh art, Dulac warned that the journal would serve as a site for collective creativity and would not confine debates on the cinema to an ivory tower. Dulac did not promote a “pure” or “integral cinema” as the only or even primary mode of filmic expression; rather, a “pure” cinema would serve the dialectical function of the modernist avant-garde in cultivating innovation.

Despite the international congresses of ciné-club movements that Dulac organized in 1929, Abel writes that they “remained basically elitist, appealing to a restricted number of artists, intellectuals, cinéphiles, and (to use as unflattering label from the period ‘boisterous snobs’)” (264). Dulac seems to have questioned herself regularly, like Woolf, as to whether her practice matched her theory, whether she was indeed “a snob.” Both Woolf and Dulac balanced a dedication to the avant-garde and a readiness to explore the popular (in Woolf’s “light” works such as *Flush*, and in Dulac’s commercial cinema), and moreover, to expand the audiences of the avant-garde through lectures, essays, and socialist organizational work. Their efforts to attract new audiences were less motivated

---

21 Dulac’s career began as a writer for the feminist journals *La Française* and *La Fronde*, from 1909 to 1914 (Cornwell 31).
by monetary gains than humanist beliefs; they saw lyric narrative art as engaging audiences as active participants, an alternative to popular narratives’ tendency to engage audiences as passive consumers.

In addition to unpacking the label of *l’art pour l’art* in Dulac’s filmwork, the group labels and technical terminology associated with the complex network of the French narrative avant-garde cinema during its first three decades also require a clarification. Dulac has been categorized under the headings “First Avant-Garde” and “Impressionist Cinema,” and these are indeed terms she used herself in one of the earliest historical analyses of the French avant-garde, her article “The Avant-Garde Cinema” published in 1932. The “First Avant-Garde,” also termed the first wave, is generally characterized as a group including Abel Gance, Marcel L’Herbier, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and Jean Epstein, who had each “made feature-length narrative films within or on the margins of the commercial film industry between 1919 and 1924” (Abel 279). The “Second Avant-Garde,” or second wave, is characterized as striking out further from the margins in pursuit of “pure,” “abstract,” Dada or surrealist cinema, and whose shorter films were produced between 1924 and 1929. Of course, in practice these boundaries are hardly immutable. Nonetheless, they are useful and warranted, as filmmakers of this period themselves recognized a transition, particularly to a younger generation of filmmakers in the mid-twenties. The loose categories of the first and second avant-garde are particularly useful to this study in that Dulac’s work spans both:

---

22 Ian Christie, revising Noël Burch’s classification, traces “three main strands of avant-garde production” across the 1920s: “First, the naturalistic narrative, usually set in rural landscape or beside the sea; second, the modernist, often reflexive narrative; and third, the ‘film poem’, which might be abstract, ironic, or symbolic” (60).
The Smiling Madame Beudet is characteristic of the first, and The Seashell and the Clergyman is characteristic of the second. The members of the first avant-garde, whose work at expanding the boundaries of film as an art through the subversion of generic expectations, provided a foundation for the second avant-garde, and members of the first, particularly Dulac, also participated in the later experimentation.

The label “Impressionist Cinema,” often used interchangeably with the first avant-garde, proves more problematic in its evocation of a nineteenth-century style of painting. Following Dulac herself, film critics’ use of the term to refer to a subjective cinema does, nonetheless, share the impetus of the impressionist and symbolist movements of art and literature for a new realism: “to be truthful to one’s individual perception of the physical social world” (Abel 280). For the twentieth-century authors Woolf, H.D., and Dulac, such fidelity meant attention to a character’s interiority and the flux underlying a seemingly coherent real. Dulac described cinema’s “Impressionist” era as beginning around 1920 and characterized by the “psychological film”:

“Impressionism made us see nature and its objects as elements concurrent with the action. A shadow, a light, a flower had, above all, a meaning, as the reflection of a mental state or an emotional situation, then, little by little, became a necessary complement, having an intrinsic value of its own” (qtd. in Abel 280). Dulac’s focus on and use of the image—as both the reflection of a subject’s mental or emotional perspective and having its own intrinsic value—echoes H.D.’s use of a “shadow, a light, a flower” in her imagist poetry.
and Woolf’s early experiments in short fiction, such as “Kew Gardens.” The interesting development in this use of the image is the acknowledgement of its own “intrinsic value,” as containing a dual meaning not reducible to “symbolism.” As in Woolf’s “Street Haunting” meditations on the necessary back and forth between the objective “enormous eye” and the imaginative elaborations of the mind (CE 4: 156), Dulac describes impressionist cinema as the exploration of a subjective cinema in counterpoint with the objective camera eye.

A final problematic term in this comparative analysis is “modernism,” which in French film studies has often been the label for vaunted “non-narrative films” in contrast to seemingly compromised “‘Impressionist’ narrative films” (Abel 280). I will continue to use modernist as a term inclusive of a variety of avant-garde narrative (and non-narrative) projects in literature, criticism, and film: what the works of Benjamin, Dulac, Woolf, and H.D. share is the categorization of modernist lyric narrative. Thus, Dulac’s films, although belonging to the “French narrative avant-garde” are also, in the comparative lens of this study, modernist lyric narratives.24

Abel’s working definition of narrative avant-garde film practice provides a vocabulary for discussing Dulac’s films as lyric narrative texts. Noël Burch and Jean André Fieschi offered a reassessment of the first and second avant-garde categorizations in a 1968 essay that emphasized the modernist lyric narrative inclination of filmmakers.

---

23 Jesse Matz’s Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics gives a trenchant reassessment of impressionism in literature, the use of the term across disciplines, and how impressionism served a feminist standpoint.

24 This is not to suggest that all French narrative avant-garde films are lyric narratives, nor are all lyric narrative films French.
like Dulac. Quoting Jean Epstein, Burch and Fieschi saw the first avant-garde filmmakers transforming the object of film as art: “a subject thus conceived as a ‘bass clef,’” permitting the construction of plastic harmonies” (20). As in the modernist fiction already examined in which narrative provides a ground for figuring lyric departures, here cinematic narrative is figured as a “bass clef,” which enables the lyric “construction of plastic harmonies,” or poetic departures. Moreover, as the films of Vertov and Buñuel suggest in their use of the image of the eye and camera lens, the narrative avant-garde shared with literary modernism a self-reflexive focus in their lyric departures from narrative. Such films focus on the issues of cinematic discourse and the image, questioning cinema as an objective reflection of the world.25 Given Abel’s attention to the nuances of genre, form, content, and context, the arc of Dulac’s film experimentation is usefully analyzed according to his schema of five elements, a taxonomy for redefining the French narrative avant-garde: referentiality, narration and representation, syntactical continuity, rhetorical figuring, and narrative structure.

In order to wrest the new medium from the grip of literature and drama, which had conventionally determined a film’s “referentiality,” the narrative avant-garde substituted a documentary reality for literary referentiality. Filmmakers such as Dulac and Epstein pursued another approach, questioning how “reality” is conceived and represented, thus emphasizing the “photogénie,” the enigmatic image that flits past, as the object of a “quasi-epistemological quest” that would supplant narrative progression (Abel

---

25 Abel also makes this point: “the material of narrative film discourse, as a ‘language’ or system of signification, often became the actual subject of avant-garde film practice. At its furthest advance, that practice involved some form of self-reflexivity” (290).
The concept of photogénie also worked against conventional films’ “rhetorical figuring,” the fourth element of Abel’s schema, which had largely employed discursive formulations borrowed from verbal and written language (294). Narrative avant-garde films “explored the connotative possibilities of photogénie in networks of motifs and metonymical/metaphorical associations” (Abel 294). In contrast to conventional rhetorical figuring, Dulac’s development of the psychological film reveals a structural parallel to Freudian psychoanalysis (and the fugue writing of Woolf and H.D.) in its use of “repetition and variation, condensation and displacement, metonymy and metaphor” (Abel 294).

The source of a film’s “narration and representation,” the second element of Abel’s schema, had conventionally been determined by the film’s frequency of dependency upon intertitles and was characterized by “an uninterrupted, clear, direct, narrative flow, in which all elements were diegeticized” (293). The third element, a film’s “syntactical continuity,” or linear narrative flow, had similarly evolved along Hollywood’s “‘classical’ spatial-temporal continuity style of editing” (Abel 293).

Dulac’s interest in visual rhythm, the contrast of temporal dimensions in memory and fantasy, and her poetic use of image clusters characterizes the narrative avant-garde’s departure from classical syntactical continuity and reinvention of cinematic rhetorical figuring. Finally, narrative avant-garde films pursued a number of alternatives to conventional literary “narrative structure,” particularly in their subversive use of genres and evocation of the structure of dreams (292).

Since The Smiling Madame Beudet was adapted from a play (a “Tragi-comedie en deux actes” by Denys Amiel and André Obey in 1920), one might assume the film to
have a high degree of conventional referentiality. However, the narrative structure of the film utilizes generic conventions and expectations of syntactical continuity as a frame for a self-reflexive subversion of such expectations, thus enabling an exploration of lyric rhetorical figuring. The film disrupts syntactical continuity (pointedly slowing or speeding up the passage of time), departs from objective narrative flow (representing instead several of the characters’ psychological points of view), evokes multiple genres (the bourgeois melodrama, the realist film, the crime drama), and flouts conventions of narrative closure (in the authorial presence and ambiguity of the final scene). In comparison, Dulac’s surrealist style in *The Seashell and the Clergyman* drops this comparative frame and departs more fully from each of Abel’s five aspects of filmic narrative conventions and expectations.

Dulac’s own reflections on the development of avant-garde cinema support a comparison with the evolution of modernist lyric narrative in literature: Dulac’s avant-garde cinema, like literary modernism, sought to break free from narrative, dramatic conventions. In “The Avant-Garde Cinema” (1928), Dulac describes the evolution of “narrative cinema.” From cinema’s earliest stages, “photographic reproduction” served “before every other effort, [as] an outlet for literature […] so the cinema entered into the cerebral domain of narrative movement” and “turned the cinema into a photographed stage show,” arbitrarily “theatrical” and “novelistic” (44-5). Although this narrative cinema, in which “plot was wrapped in realistic forms and the emotions reduced to proportions which were strictly true and human” (according to a literary referentiality), persisted for years, new ideas for “expressive pacing” and “organization of the images” led to the “thought of photographing the unexpressed, the invisible, the imponderable, the
human soul, the visual ‘suggestive’,” a suggestive counterpart to “the precision of photography” (45).

From this dialectical conception of cinema, the “psychological film” emerged. In such films, a character’s “interior life” is attended to and “his thoughts, his feeling, his sensations” are evoked visually (45). Dulac’s general description of this type of film in 1928 clearly describes her own ground-breaking “psychological film,” *The Smiling Madame Beudet*:

> With the addition to the bare facts of the drama of the description of the multiple contradictory impressions in the course of an action—the facts no longer existing in themselves, but becoming the consequence of a moral state—a duality imperceptibly entered, a duality which, to remain in equilibrium, adapted itself to the cadence of a rhythm, to the dynamism and pace of the images. (45)

Thus, it is in elaborating a rhythm, balancing the lyrical “multiple contradictory impressions” of characters’ subjective states with the “bare facts of the drama” of a realist narrative progression, that “the avant-activity began,” and this “avant-activity” is explicitly linked to the entrance of “a duality” (45). Moreover, Dulac’s location of the birth of the avant-garde cinema in psychological films suggests the importance of *The Smiling Madame Beudet* in her own development of experimental film.

In analyzing how the formal elements of Dulac’s films depart from conventional narrative expectations, my aim is to show not only her use of lyric narrative form but also how this form enables a feminist cinema, a counterpart to Woolf’s feminist fiction. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s narrator advises that the woman writer who would “catch those unrecorded gestures” of Chloe and Olivia, “unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex,” would need to take up as “oblique” a method as Proust’s (84-85). One of the few women directors and perhaps the sole woman director of the avant-garde
in early cinema, Germaine Dulac advises her audience that if cinema is not to be a “mirror of the other arts” banally reflecting the same conventional fictions (coloured by the light of the other gender), then it must make use of its unique visual and temporal aesthetic capacities, its ability to provide “an eye wide open on life, an eye more powerful than our own and which sees things we cannot see” (“The Visual Idea” 37, 39).

Teresa de Lauretis offers a useful definition of feminist cinema, which I employ in this analysis, in her essay “Strategies of Coherence: The Poetics of Film Narrative.” According to De Lauretis, “feminist cinema” refers not simply to “an aesthetic or typological category,” but is rather “the notation for a process of reinterpretation and retexualization of cultural images and narratives whose strategies of coherence engage the spectator’s identification through narrative and visual pleasure and yet succeed in drawing ‘the Real’ into the film’s texture” (193). Emphasizing over and again the dynamics of the audience and avant-garde artwork by stressing that “cinema is an art and an industry,” Dulac sees in the formal/aesthetic innovations of avant-garde cinema the

26 Regina Cornwell, writing of “Activists of the Avant-Garde” in an issue of Film Library Quarterly dedicated to “Women in Film,” notes that “[i]f there have been few women directors in commercial cinema, proportionately there have been and still are fewer women working within the avant-garde”—Dulac being the first (29).

27 De Lauretis refers to Fredric Jameson’s use of “the Real”; she quotes The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act: “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . . , as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and . . . our approach to it and to the Real itself [capital R in Real, signaling that this is Lacan’s term] necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (35). De Lauretis writes, “In this sense, then, interpretation can be seen as a rewriting of the text intended to show how the text itself is ‘the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext,’ which the process of interpretation (re)constructs as the symbolic resolution of determinate contradictions in the Real” (190). Thus, for Jameson and De Lauretis, the critic’s act of interpretation and the poet or filmmaker’s act of creating a palimpsestic text entails an engagement with the Real.
creative interface with “the Real” that De Lauretis describes as a feminist cinema: “The avant-garde is born of both the criticism of the present and the foreknowledge of the future” (Dulac, “Avant-Garde” 43). For Dulac, the “art and industry” or the “avant-garde and commercial” aspects of cinema are inseparable. The commercial aspect of cinema pursues a necessary economic goal, but the avant-garde cinema is an essential counterpart (even when the public initially rejects it) since it bears the “seeds” of evolution for both cinema as an artform and the artform as an impetus for social progress (43-44).

Likewise, for Walter Benjamin the dialectical image retains an essential ambiguity. While it bears the seeds of a revolutionary epiphany, it is necessarily comprised of the material of the bourgeois cultural landscape and thus its “regressive and utopian potential are inextricably interlaced” (Wolin 104).

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, who notes that Dulac’s filmmaking isn’t avowedly feminist, discusses the feminism inherent in her work by turning to the necessary perspective of “theory—of enunciation, sexual difference, and the cinematic apparatus” (33). Her analysis directly connects Dulac’s narrative innovation and her feminism: “Dulac’s entire oeuvre can be said to represent the feminist project of conceptualizing differing ways of articulating women’s relation to language and the body” (131).

However, I find problematic the use of the term “femininity” by both Flitterman-Lewis and Maggie Humm in writing of modernist women’s feminist film practice. Both Flitterman-Lewis and Humm argue that these texts are feminist in staking out a positive

---

28 For example, Humm turns to domestic photography’s “pregnant burden of the psychic Imaginary” and “repressed femininities” in Woolf’s visual images, arguing finally that “women modernists write the feminine by analyzing cinema through a gendered lens” (Modernist Women 6-7, 185).
“femininity” (one that is often prelinguistic in Humm’s reading); whereas, I would argue that they are feminist in exposing the conventional construct of “femininity” as an essence of the female sex or as presymbolic. I agree that the films show women in relation to language and the body in a new way, an alternative to a patriarchal gaze or framing. However, to term this alternative as “feminine” is to perpetuate the binary the feminist alternative seeks to deconstruct or to privilege a utopian notion of the “feminine” that disregards the contingent realities of women’s lives.

My analysis of Dulac’s work as feminist is both text-based and based on Dulac’s film activism—her theorizing and public dialogue in favor of revolutionizing the artform and thus providing new perspectives, new possibilities of knowledge, and privileging new narratives. Among the “Impressionist” second avant-garde that Dulac is typically grouped with, Dulac’s influence in developing the cinema stands out. Regina Cornwell, like Abel, echoes Rene Jeanne’s and Charles Henri Ford’s early high estimation of the centrality of Dulac’s ideas and “the uncompromising fashion with which she set about her tasks […] never the dogmatist, always optimistic, confident and encouraging about the future of the dynamic art to which she had dedicated her life and her vision” (30). Like Woolf, Dulac’s commitment to developing the seventh art meant a particular awareness of her relationship with her audience.

Revolutionizing the artform could mean opening new possibilities for audiences, but those new possibilities concomittant with a new form would not be realized if audiences rejected innovations or if audiences were confined to a narrow elite. It is the ethic of care behind the relationship Woolf and Dulac negotiated with their audiences that marks their modernism as particularly feminist and humanist. Nonetheless, this
audience-author relationship was complex and troubled both women. Woolf finesses her critique of audiences who want only “materialist” eye soporifics—“the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (156)—in drawing her readers into a more ambiguous and psychological lyric narrative in pieces such as “Street Haunting.” Likewise, Dulac emphasizes that she wishes to speak not only to the few viewers who “love the cinema for its future possibilities” but also to those who “love the cinema in its present state” (“The Visual Idea” 42). These (reluctant) viewers are ironically given a heroic role in a chivalric narrative, appealed to “liberate the cinema from its shackles,” as it is foremost these viewers’ influence that will decide whether this “beautiful art [will be kept] prisoner, an art whose future is so much greater than the miserable little stories we make it tell” (42).

4.5 Framing the Object of Lyric: The Smiling Madame Beudet

In The Smiling Madame Beudet (1923), Dulac negotiates the “art and industry” of cinema as well as the lyric possibilities of narrative cinema. Dulac produced films characteristic of the first avant-garde, adapted literary texts for an experimental cinema, directed popular serials, and moved ultimately toward the radical second avant-garde of the late 1920s. Since its experimental innovations are grounded within conventions of

---

29 In comparison with second avant-garde filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel and Jean Renoir whose careers began later in the 1920s, Dulac’s career began within commercial cinema. Abel singles out Dulac’s efforts in regenerating the foundering French film industry during the early to mid 1920s. Dulac managed to sustain the film company D.E.L.I.A. which she founded with the writer Irene Hillel-Erlanger and her then-husband Albert Dulac in 1915. In 1921, she dissolved the company, visited the United States to acquire knowledge of new technological advances (meeting D. W. Griffith), and then took up free-lance work in Germany and Italy. The commercial company Film d’Art agreed to finance Dulac’s “personal production” of The Smiling
the commercial industry, *The Smiling Madame Beudet* is representative of the first avant-garde. Cornwell cites Dulac’s own description of the film as she was working on it: “It is an avant-garde film, if one terms ‘avant-garde’ a cinematographic work to which one brings a new and constant effort in the composition of the scenario, the technical realization, and the selection of actors” (32). If “[t]o make a film and distribute it require money, a lot of money” (“Avant-Garde” 43), then the relative commercial success of *The Smiling Madame Beudet* provided Dulac with some surplus of commercial credit to bring impressionist innovations to a wider public. Given the Film d’Art company’s aim of fortifying a bourgeois status quo in cinema, Dulac seemed a curious directorial prospect for company; nonetheless, on paper, *The Smiling Madame Beudet* offered a dramatic narrative that promised popularity—a familiar domestic conflict and a potential murder.30

On film, however, the narrative drama proved subordinate to Dulac’s interest in exploring the portrayal of subjective realities and the psychological damage the bourgeois home inflicts on women. Rather than emphasizing story, Dulac’s film tunnels into the thoughts and feelings of her protagonist and attempts to visualize what language falters after.

The audience views a day (beginning one afternoon and continuing through the subsequent morning) in the life of a cultured provincial housewife, actress Germaine Dermoz, and her draper merchant husband, actor Arquillière. The drama’s tension is the conflict between Madame Beudet’s artistic identity and her husband’s boorish

---

30 *The Smiling Madame Beudet* was contracted under the Film d’Art company, a company which had established itself since 1909 as chiefly concerned with raising the cultural standard of cinema by attracting large middle and upper class audiences with popular feature films (Cornwell 33, Christie 56).
provincialism. While this tension seems to progress along a conventionally theatrical narrative, building to the climax of a possible murder, Dulac’s exploration of the psychology of her protagonist (although not as a criminal) persistently interrupts the narrative progression. In an interview published in July 11, 1924, Dulac underscores this focus: “The cinema is marvelously equipped to express the manifestations of our thought, of our hearts, of our memories” (qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 98). This “commercial” film enabled Dulac to reveal the aesthetic potential of the medium as Madame Beudet escapes her overbearing husband into fantasies and memories that are expressed visually through advanced cinematic techniques.

Abel has aptly described the film as “a bourgeois marriage criticized from within, from the perspective of its most unwilling victim” (341). However, as Abel notes, the film utilizes a range of perspectives, beginning with the point of view of an omniscient narrator (or an implied auteur, the filmic counterpart of the implied author). The film’s opening uses a montage of images to establish the contrasting subjectivity of Madame and Monsieur. More innovative sequences follow, increasingly depicting Madame Beudet’s vision. Flitterman-Lewis describes these as fantasy sequences and charts a progression of “shorter subjective sequences” that build to a climax “in what can be called the ‘fantasy-solitude’ sequence” (102).31

The first fantasy sequence, like the opening montage of images, offers the point of view of both Madame and Monsieur Beudet, juxtaposing their contrasting views of

---

31 Flitterman-Lewis focuses on this “fantasy-solitude” sequence, analyzing its seven segments and identifying them by content: “1) ‘Initial solitude’ (two shots); 2) ‘The Poem’ (fourteen shots); 3) ‘The Maid’ (eight shots); 4) ‘Imprisonment’ (eighteen shots); 5) ‘Fantasy of the Phantom Lover’ (thirteen shots); and 7) ‘The Resolution’ (three shots)” (106).
Gounod’s *Faust*. A shot of Monsieur Beudet singing, a fade to black, and a shot of an opera chorus surrounding Marguerite portray his enthusiasm as he attempts to persuade his reluctant wife to attend the opera that evening. The viewer next sees a close up of Madame Beudet, a fade to black, and a shot of the face of Mephistopheles singing despotically to a terrified Marguerite who is several times smaller and fending him off with an outstretched arm. When Madame Beudet refuses the opera invitation from Madame and Monsieur Lebas, Monsieur Beudet’s associate, her husband takes out an empty revolver from his desk and threatens suicide. An intertitle notes this “*parodie du suicide*” is “a simple and often repeated pleasantry.” The narrative instability of the film progresses from the introduction of this suicide parody, apparently a running joke for the couple (or at least for Monsieur Beudet). Alone in the house that night, having found her piano locked by her husband and unable to find comfort in her fantasies (the long “fantasy-solitude” sequence), Madame Beudet loads the revolver. On the following morning, Madame Beudet is overwrought with “Remorse” (as an intertitle suggests) for her decision, and she attempts unsuccessfully to unload the gun before her husband repeats the joke. However, Monsieur Beudet flies into a rage over a missing check, suddenly aims the gun at his wife, and fires. The shot misses, and Monsieur kneels by his wife in a rush of adoration, dubiously having concluded that she has attempted suicide. The camera captures Madame Beudet’s cold off-center stare of resignation, and the concluding shots underscore the audience’s sense that she is permanently entrapped, cut off from even her mind’s eye’s excursions.

Flitterman-Lewis’s analysis of the film in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* offers a trenchant examination of the film’s narrative departures into
“the very interiority of this world,” showing how the careful ordering and construction of sequences allows Dulac to fulfill her intention as stated in 1924: “If the opposition and succession of images are capable of creating movement, they can also perfectly depict the state of mind of a character, enabling us to enter his thoughts more readily than words can do” (100, 106). Building on Flitterman-Lewis’s excellent sequence analysis, I want to address Dulac’s turn to the material object and projected image as an interface between the poetic and prosaic in creating a subversive lyric narrative film.

Georges Sadoul writes that Dulac, in deriving The Smiling Madame Beudet from the stage drama, employs “the exponents of the ‘theatre of silence’ involving formalized mimetic staging” (350). Sadoul argues that while “objects, too,” for example, a vase of flowers that Madame Beudet continually moves off-center on a table and that her husband continually moves back to center, “are used to express the domestic conflict” they “are not ‘symbols’” as they might be in a clearly theatrical film (350). I would further suggest that these objects should be considered in light of their reference to Baudelaire (Madame Beudet reads Baudelaire’s “La Mort des amants”), whom Walter Benjamin usefully describes as an allegorist.32 Indeed, it would be difficult to underestimate the importance of images and objects in the film, as they function as dialectical switchpoints between the narrative and lyric modes, thus offering filmmaker and audience an alternative logic for narrative progression from first to last.

32 In his discussion of “Impressionist allegory,” Matz argues that “allegory is what happens as Impressionists lose faith in the oneness of the impression” (44). Matz cites Benjamin’s appreciation of “Baudelaire’s fragmentary symbols for their oneness with modern discontinuity” (207); “the form of the Impressionist allegory is erratic, dialectically motivated, hitting at different moments on different reconfigurations” (209).
Abel quotes a lecture in which Dulac gave a close analysis of *The Smiling Madame Beudet*’s opening and the symbolic elements that establish the characters: after several realist shots of “melancholy in the empty streets, in the quaint, tiny human figures. The province. . .,” viewers see a close up in split screen of “two hands playing a piano and two hands feeling the weight of a silver knife” which signify “[t]wo characters. Contrary ideals. . . different dreams, we already know it; and without seeing a single person” (342). A montage of shots of Madame Beudet’s piano music, Debussy’s “Piano a deux mains,” of light on rippling water, and a book, signify “Intellectualism,” according to Dulac. These are in counterpoint to a montage of shots associated with Monsieur Beudet: money, clothing shop samples, a desk and calendar, which signify “Materialism” (342). Given Dulac’s emphsis on Madame Beudet’s psychology, “Materialism” can refer here to both Monsieur’s preoccupation with material wealth (theatrical symbolism) and a philosophical view that reduces sense to physicality (contra Madame’s and the film’s lyric, dialectical vision).

Dulac’s feminist critique, like Woolf’s in *A Room of One’s Own*, is inextricable from a socialist critique of gendered hierarchies of money and power and the systems of thought they perpetuate. At first glance, the stark contrast of the film’s opening montage suggests a vulgar symbolism and Ibsen’s drama in which female protagonists are often portrayed as childlike; however, Dulac stresses Madame Beudet’s “Intellectualism” which is enabled by, yet entrapped within, the “Materialist” enclosure of the bourgeoisie home. Nonetheless, like the narrator’s view of a man and a woman sharing a taxi in *A Room of One’s Own*, Dulac does not privilege a mere inversion of patriarchal hierarchies. Dulac continued, “the characters have already been established through images […]
sharply outlined and put in opposition. All of a sudden, a long shot of the room brings them together but in a deep space of foreground/background distinctions. Abruptly, all the disparity of a marriage is revealed” (Abel 342). Dulac does not propose a severance of mind and matter, imagination and reality, along a gendered binary. The “disparity” of the marriage lies in the sharp opposition of the cultural construction of gender roles and the actual being of individuals in those roles. In exploring this dialectic of “Intellectualism” and “Materialism,” a dialectic with implications not merely for her characters but also self-reflexively for the medium, Dulac’s film recalls Woolf’s exploration of the psychological depth of the creative mind and the material-greedy “enormous eye” of “Street Haunting,” which are ultimately inseparable for Woolf’s androgynous narrator as well. The images and objects that signify this dialectic function mimetically (at the level of story) as the privileged locus of escape from the temporal and spatial confines of Madame Beudet’s world, and simultaneously function synthetically (at the level of viewer and filmmaker) as the privileged means of departure from “literary” narratives into cinematic innovation and audiences’ active engagement.

Dulac’s portrayal also takes up the feminist critique of the gendering of material space into public (male) and private (female) spheres. The mise-en-scène of their study first establishes Madame and Monsieur’s separation and difference; Madame Beudet is given her own space that is backed by a shelf of books with flowers and dolls, a small table and chair at which she reads magazines, and her piano. Monsieur invades this space when agitated, crossing from his side of the room which contains books of drapery samples, clocks and calendars, and a large desk which blocks the only window. However, the film also stresses how thinly the gendered spheres are divided and the
constructions upon which such a “disparity” depends. Monsieur Beudet may be boorish, but his masculinity is problematized by his frequent ventures into his wife’s space—which is at times intrusive, but his gesture of rearranging the vase of flowers hardly suggests a stereotype of masculinity. Dulac does not portray Monsieur Beudet as a one-dimensional tyrant; his sympathetic engagement with their cat particularly underscores this point. Dulac’s association of Madame’s character with “Intellectualism,” an engagement with art and music, rather than “femininity” (which is emphasized in the stage play) likewise complicates simplistic binaries.

Dulac’s film does not champion a feminism of Madame Beudet’s relative autonomy within the “feminine” confines of her home nor does it glorify her ability to use her imagination to subvert patriarchal boorishness in her fantasies. Rather, Dulac’s framing of the film’s narrative content leads viewers to question the passivity of Madame’s resistance. For example, she does not seize upon the opportunity to escape the house to attend the opera, which might initially seem a rejection of participation in a public sphere. However, we see that her refusal is of the patriarchal economy both of Faust and the display of attending the opera (the Lebas’s envision what they will wear that evening and Monsieur Beudet envisions others’ point of view of he and his wife sitting in the audience). She intends instead to stay at home alone for the possibility of being able to play the piano. This passive resistance, however, is ultimately subverted by Monsieur’s act of locking the piano, and, during the “fantasy-solitude” sequence that follows, Madame’s own inability to escape his internalized, domineering presence.

Flitterman-Lewis categorizes the images Madame Beudet sees in this sequence using Jean Mitry’s categorization of subjective images: “Madame Beudet ‘sees’ optically
subjective images (shots which convey her perceptual viewpoint), semi-subjective images (shots which suggest her emotional attitude toward an object), and purely mental images (memories, thoughts, and fantasies)” (106). To Flitterman-Lewis, the segments of the “fantasy-solitude” sequence (which she identifies as seven segments made up of carefully alternating shots) thus imply that it is Madame Beudet’s vision articulating the composition of the sequence: “In this way, Madame Beudet is continually determined as the central focus of spectator-identification,” and thus Dulac simultaneously is able to fulfill her goal of entering (and allowing the audience to enter) a character’s thoughts more effectively than words can (106). What perhaps deserves further emphasis, however, is the presence of the implied author—that is, Dulac’s presence in articulating Madame Beudet’s vision—particularly since this use of subjective images disrupted mimetic cinematic conventions. If the film can be thought of as a progression of sequences that explore Madame Beudet’s interiority, as Flitterman-Lewis writes, then it is equally important to note the dynamics of authorial presence.

This authorial presence introduces and closes the film, which takes place nearly entirely within the two floors of the home. The sense of entrapment this narrow mise-en-scène conveys is intensified in the “fantasy-solitude” sequence, in which the windows

---

33 The negative reviews Dulac’s film received when first released focused foremost on “intrusive” authorial devices, the subjective images meant to suggest Madame’s emotional state. Jacques Brunius is characteristic of this critical trend in denigrating the “subjective” techniques of the avant-garde. Writing of Dulac’s use of superimpositions to “indicate violent emotion in one of her characters,” he held, “I do not know whether my eyeballs are peculiarly stable and unemotional, or simply whether I have never been sufficiently moved, but no such affective diplopia ever afflicted me, and a vision of this sort on the screen conveys nothing at all to me” (84). Ironically, following the film’s revival during the First Festival of Women’s Films in New York City in 1972, Marjorie Rosen noted that these once innovative techniques create “such clichéd situations that they can only seem comic today” (378).
cast barred shadows and a reverse shot of the view shows a penitentiary and court house: “Always the same horizons . . .” During the course of the film, the camera leaves the home only in the opening and closing shots and briefly at the midpoint of the film to introduce the following morning. These shots mark a departure and return from a heterodiegetic point of view, an authorial presence that is the cinematic equivalent of framing a “narrated monologue” of Madame Beudet’s vision (Cohn 14). In the opening shots, an intertitle introduces “In the provinces . . .” and is followed by a series of somber, realist street images. However, at the film’s conclusion, the repetition of this intertitle beside an intertitle from the central “fantasy-solitude” sequence reminds viewers of the implied author composing Madame Beudet’s vision. In the final shot, Madame Beudet is shown from behind in medium shot, walking up a cobblestone street between Monsieur Beudet and a high wall; the intertitles register a concluding chord: “In the provinces . . .” “In the quiet streets, without horizon, under the heavy sky. . . . Joined together by habit” (emphasis added).

Dulac’s critique condemns the “habit” of conventional narratives that perpetuate the horizonless course of both the man and woman in the final shot. The visual pleasure of the “fantasy” shots, such as the expressive close ups of Madame Beudet’s smiling face in a luminous reverie and even Monsieur Beudet’s naïve enthusiasm for Faust, provide a suggestive counterpoint to the dismal shots of prosaic reality which mark, not a happily ever after, but a return to narrative realism and Madame Beudet’s “sentencing” to a narrow life in the provinces. In Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” the narrator must also return to “habit,” the socially constructed and contained “I” within the familiar confines of one’s room. However, Woolf’s androgynous narrator, as a writer-flâneur in pursuit of a pencil,
has the ability to continue to depart from habit at will and thus alter the habitual. Neither Dulac nor Woolf proposes abolishing “habit” in these texts, and indeed their poetic departures depend upon the frustrations of the habitual progression of conventional narratives. Nonetheless, by focusing on the counterpoint to the prosaic in elaborating lyric departures, these authors encourage audiences to venture further in exploring experience and sense beyond the sentence of the habitual.

The repetition with variation of the images and intertitles above suggests how Dulac’s carefully composed structure draws attention to itself. Similarly, Dulac’s use of objects, ranging from symbolist to impressionist, evokes poetic composition—a “musical” composition, in Dulac’s words. In artfully depicting Madame Beudet’s consciousness, this arrangement draws viewers to identify not only with the character (who is ultimately trapped) but also with the composer (who is clearly not). A set of images associated with time particularly exemplifies Dulac’s development of a theme in her composition. As in Woolf’s “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” in which a phrase and a dropped flower both initiates and is the continued punctuation of imaginative departures for her protagonist, in Dulac’s film, objects of time and their association with Monsieur Beudet both provoke Madame Beudet’s departures into a timeless fantasy and punctuate her inevitable return to habitual standard time.

Monsieur Beudet’s habit of constantly consulting his watch, his close monitoring of the calendar, and his bookkeeping are all metonymic symbols of his “Materialist” subjectivity. In portraying Madame Beudet, Dulac’s use of such images is more impressionist in the images’ paradigmatic development. After her husband has left and Madame has found her piano locked (shutting her off from an alternative sense of time in
Debussy’s music), Dulac includes a montage juxtaposing medium close ups: Madame Beudet’s meditative expression, the face of a mantle clock, Madame Beudet’s profile in halo, the face of a grandfather clock, opposite profile of Madame Beudet turning to look, a medium shot of a church bell ringing. In a long take of a medium shot, we seem to be looking at Madame Beudet through a large window, but a reverse shot reveals that she stares into a mirror, and she then leans her head upon a glass cloche covering the mantle clock that sits before the mirror. The choice of long takes for these shots provides a temporal contrast to the subsequent short takes of the fantasy montage, Madame Beudet’s subjective point of view, in which Monsieur Beudet seems to leap in slow motion through the window. The imagined Monsieur Beudet is shown in a fast-cut series of fast motion shots—banging on her piano, pursuing her for help with his collar, and then (in slow motion) repeating his suicide parody gesture—shots punctuated by distorted close ups of his laughing face and grotesque smile. The objects of clock and calendar have thus far unobtrusively functioned as symbols of Madame’s desire to escape the repetitious round of their bourgeois existence. These temporally variable point of view shots of her fantasy life, inaugurated by her contact with the mantle clock, are vertical departures from the film’s linear narrative progression that powerfully engage both eye and brain. As viewers, we are made aware of how Madame Beudet’s temporally variable imaginative realm is both provoked and anchored by the habitual tick of the clock.

On the following morning, when Madame Beudet wakes and is tormented over her decision to load the gun, Dulac uses the time-related image impressionistically in superimposing a slow motion shot of a swinging pendulum over Madame Beudet. She sways back and forth in time to the superimposed pendulum with head in hands, as if
compelled to set her self to the external order. As in the “fantasy-solitude” sequence, the viewer is “appealed to directly […] by means of a visual language which functions, paradoxically, by indirectness. This is a process of ‘suggestive magic’ actualized in cinematic images—the Symbolist poem visualized” (Flitterman-Lewis 107). This process of “suggestive magic” marks the reciprocal interest between modernist literature and the new art of cinema; indeed this process of suggestive magic is both the method and subject of the self-reflexive lyric narratives of Woolf and H.D. and of Benjamin’s criticism. Steven Kellman writes that a motivation behind the drive to create cinematic novels “must surely be a legacy of symbolist impatience with mere words, each worth but .001 percent of the picture” (274). This motivation can also be tracked in the evolution of the lyric moment in H.D.’s imagist poetry and Woolf’s short fiction, which attempt to convey “the thing itself” rather than to refer (Woolf, TTL 193). Dulac identifies referentiality with the “literary” in cinema: “Every cinematic drama, whether created by forms of movement or by human beings in a state of crisis, must be visual and not literary, and the impression retained, the essence of the creative idea or the driving feeling must emerge uniquely from the optical harmonies” (“Anti-visual” 31). In writing of a new direction for cinema, Woolf and H.D. in their film criticism echo Dulac

---

34 Jeanne Betancourt, who discusses Dulac’s psychological techniques and “feminist perspective,” writes, “It is only in her imagination that things appear in fast or slow time. Her real life will not allow any deviation from the norm” (121).

35 Dulac’s argument here, surveying the phases of the cinema in 1928 and emphasizing the communication of the “essence of the creative idea or the driving feeling” (31) bears strikingly similarities to Woolf’s “Phases of Fiction” (1929).
in rejecting the “literary,” conventional narrative, instead advocating examples of how imagism and symbolism (aligned with the poetic) had provided a new direction for prose.

The use of the word “photogénie” to describe the project of the first avant-garde filmmakers points to this process of suggestive magic, the attempt to allow the audience to discover directly “the essence of the creative idea” (“Anti-visual” 31). In the 1920s, the term photogénie (used by writers such as Collette and Epstein in writing about French cinema)\(^3\) accumulated a complexity similar to the modernist lyric or epiphanic moment. It is that which “flits past” according to Walter Benjamin in writing of the magic of the mimetic element in literature (335). As Monica Dall’Asta has written, the early French writings on photogénie in film tend to have a “lyrical, almost mystical character [which is] derived from the nature of photogénie itself, and offered the only possible expression for an experience that escapes, exceeds, or produces a crisis within language” (83). The authors writing on photogénie in film share the metaphors (alchemy, form and essence) of their counterparts in literary criticism in describing the process of transmuting the transient material, captured by the objective camera eye, into art. Alongside the concept of photogénie, first avant-garde film theorists argued that the effect of “a magnification of time” and “temporal perspective” revealed a “hidden world” of movement (Dall’Asta 85). Photogénie did not seek to displace a disappointing reality with the magic of art, rather it “signaled the possible poetic use of the scientific gaze, here represented by the camera lens” to reveal the mysterious “beautiful” underlying that reality (Dall’Asta 86).

---

\(^3\) According to Sitney, Epstein developed Louis Delluc’s use of the term to mean “what is essentially cinematic, [and] demanded a dialectical relationship to any given technique, which he considered merely contingent, and entailed the recognition of interrelationships among space, time, and material things within the radically idealistic structure of filmic illusion” (xvi-xvii).
Dulac turns to her “inheritance” of Baudelaire in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* not merely to allude to symbolist poetics. Rather she uses Baudelaire’s poem as an intertext in a visual text that attempts to show how the seventh art of cinema, free of linguistic binds, can achieve, as in the *photogénie*, the desired aims of symbolist poetry. In the “fantasy-solitude” sequence, Madame Beudet takes up a book of Baudelaire’s poems after finding her piano locked. Dulac creates a montage of shots, linked by fades in and out, of Madame Beudet reading, an illuminated line of the poem she reads (the opening stanza of “La Mort des amants”), a shot of an object in the house that corresponds to the line (for example “Et d’étranges fleurs sur des etageres” is juxtaposed with the vase of flowers she and her husband continually reposition on a table), and a shot of Madame Beudet’s troubled expression. Rather than Baudelaire’s lines transporting Madame Beudet out of her prosaic surroundings into one of her reveries, the lines redirect her to the objects of her daily life. Flitterman-Lewis writes that the montage is “undeniably ironic, as the banality of the objects only reinforces her dissatisfaction with a loveless marriage” (107). To Flitterman-Lewis, the montage signifies the failure of Madame Beudet’s “own cognitive powers of imagination” (108).

However, I would suggest that Dulac’s montage of text-subject-object and Madame’s gesture of throwing the book down in disgust signifies not the immediate failure of her imagination but rather her realization of a larger failure of vision. Dulac’s visual poetics have already established Madame Beudet’s “cognitive powers of imagination” (108).

---

37 Flitterman-Lewis notes Dulac’s innovation of altering the traditional perceptual shot orientation of “character seeing/object seen” to a shot disclosing imagination: “object-seen/character seeing/object-fantasized” (103).
imagination” to overcome her husband’s influence. Earlier in the film, we have seen Madame Beudet reading a magazine while Monsieur complains at his desk. Dulac shows the process of Madame reappropriating through her gaze and imagination the images of escape and power available to her from popular culture—significantly choosing images from advertisements over *Faust*. Madame Beudet, seeing a photograph of a tennis racket, next envisions a tennis player enter the room in slow motion (Dulac uses close ups of Madame Beudet, whose head is wreathed in a “luminous halo”\(^{38}\) against a black background, and superimposition for the tennis player to depict her fantasy). He moves to Monsieur Beudet’s desk and there lifts and carries off a semi-transparent Monsieur while the all too corporeal Monsieur Beudet works on unwittingly. The fantasy Madame Beudet has directed provokes an eruption of her laughter with head thrown back—a laugh that provokes her husband to repeat his suicide parody.\(^{39}\) Thus it is not Madame Beudet’s “cognitive powers” of fantasy that Dulac depicts as temporarily inadequate to escape her “bland reality” (Flitterman-Lewis 108), but rather a larger failure in imagination that the symbolist poem leads Madame Beudet to realize. Judith Mayne persuasively argues, “Like the narrators of the early [primitive] cinema, Mme Beudet can conjure and dream isolated images, but she cannot construct a narrative” (196).

\(^{38}\) These are Flitterman-Lewis’s words, as she notes the similarity between Dulac’s “psychological” close ups and Woolf’s “definition of life as ‘a luminous halo’” in “Modern Fiction” (109).

\(^{39}\) Madame Beudet does indeed smile twice in the film—at this fantasy and in her fantasy of a phantom lover—despite the repeated assertion by critics (Bawden, Braverman) that she is unsmiling, an assertion which is perhaps due to her otherwise melancholic aspect.
Madame Beudet’s imaginative powers escalate after reading and throwing away “Le Mort des amants” in both positive and negative scenarios. When the maid briefly enters, Madame Beudet (or the maid) envisions the maid’s fiancé appear and kiss her cheek, and Madame Beudet herself, shown reclining in a chair in an allusion to Madame Bovary, envisions a lover (indistinct, superimposed) enter and walk towards her with outstretched arms. However, Madame Beudet’s enigmatic, erotic smile is displaced by a close up of her eyes (a mask darkens the rest of the shot) looking toward the window. After an intertitle, “But . . .,” a disturbing montage of her husband leaping through the window and harassing her follows.40 Thus, Madame Beudet’s decision to load the gun in her husband’s desk is prefaced by 1) the “Le Mort des amants” montage, 2) the wistful fantasy montages based on romantic ideas of her maid and literary romance, and 3) the nightmare fantasy montage of her husband based on events we have already witnessed and that foreshadow the film’s end.

The montage of Baudelaire’s poem does not suggest a failure of Madame Beudet’s imagination; indeed, it prompts her to see the objects of her habitual life not as “banal” but in a new light, as correspondances. Indeed, Dulac’s corresponding shots of the objects to the poem’s lines are so carefully lit that the object itself seems to glow—a creased pillow seems to hang in a surreal darkness, the shot of the vase of flowers shares

40 Madame Beudet watches him surge into being wherever she frantically casts her eyes. Through the use of distorting lenses, fast and slow motion, lighting from below, and odd camera angles to portray memories of habitual gestures (an extreme close up of her husband grimacing and grinning, adjusting the vase of flowers in slow motion, ordering her to button his collar), Monsieur’s appearance becomes increasingly grotesque and boorish. Finally, the fantasized Monsieur repeats his suicide parody, but this time aims the gun directly at the camera/Madame. Thus, the audience is made to identify with her horror and disgust immediately before Madame Beudet takes up the gun and reaches in the drawer for bullets.
with the profile shot of Madame Beudet’s inclined head a “luminous halo.” Whereas her imagination has otherwise led Madame Beudet into fantasies of escape, the poem illuminates the narrative she inhabits. The poem creates a collision of her fantasy world and her prosaic reality. The larger failure of imagination is twofold. First, at the mimetic level, it is a failure in Madame Beudet’s a priori ability and resources to have imagined another way of living (a different life-narrative) that would have prevented her present passive entrapment in “the provinces”; it is the subsequent disjunction between her poetic ideal and prosaic reality which Baudelaire’s poem brings into focus that finally prompts Madame Beudet’s impulsive decision to act. Second, at the synthetic level, the viewer sees the failure of the symbolist poem, in comparison with the “impressionist” cinema, to reflect a contingent real and the psychological complexity of a female protagonist in modernity. Dulac’s visual text, bringing together the lyric and narrative modes, posits a technique that can realize what symbolism theorized. According to Dulac, visual poetics impress upon the eye and emotion directly: technological innovation makes “black and gray capable of caressing the eye [and with techniques of lighting] make it possible to send out to the eye radiations which touch it more powerfully” (“Anti-visual” 32). Simultaneously, the film’s composer, in returning throughout the film to a prosaic reality after having “touched” our eye with poetic immediacy, also draws the viewer back to consider the socio-political context of the tragicomedy of Madame’s poetic flights.

Reading Baudelaire leads to a demonstration of Baudelaire’s correspondances: one seizes upon an object or image, moves to a reading of its layers of corresponding socio-historic context in order to reveal (or make available) the meaning latent in the object or image, a meaning illuminated by one’s vision in a particular moment. In
Dulac’s work, and in contrast to Baudelaire’s poem, as a result of this dialectical apprehension and the charge of the object in relation to the viewer, stasis is finally broken and action becomes possible. Madame Beudet not only dramatizes this three-stage process, but (as Dulac’s synthetic construction) she is also the agent of this process for Dulac’s viewers, from whom the desired action is not necessarily Madame Beudet’s attempted break from the bourgeoisie domestic interior (as perhaps a film by Eisenstein would intend) but their liberation of “cinema from its shackles” (“The Visual Idea” 42).

As a surrogate, Madame Beudet’s interaction with Baudelaire’s poem provides a model for Dulac’s viewers. In witnessing Madame Beudet read the poem and use its lines to re-vision her own life—while simultaneously experiencing the “visual pleasure” of Dulac’s technological innovations of lighting, superimposition, and rhythmical editing—viewers “see” the potential of the new art in relation to their own lived realities. In being persuaded to accept this poetic visual portrayal of Madame Beudet’s interiority, viewers are persuaded of the potential of an avant-garde lyric cinema in revealing the transient beauty and complex realities of daily life as surpassing the closed-circuit of conventional stories and gendered plots. Thus, in this film, the intertext of Baudelaire’s poem equally serves the narrative progression as it does the film’s development of formal innovation.

In The Smiling Madame Beudet, Dulac (as does Woolf in “Street Haunting”) portrays her protagonist as a Baudelairean flâneur in order to encourage audiences to take up such a cognitive standpoint. Anne Friedberg, in Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern, describes the origins of the cinema in the mobilized gaze of “flânerie,” the same commercial-social “impulses that sent flâneurs through the arcades” sent spectators
to the cinema (94). Writing of Baudelaire’s “lyric poetry” with its unique subject of Paris as the “estranged” object of “the gaze of the allegorist,” Benjamin describes the flâneur viewpoint: “the gaze of the flâneur” sees from a standpoint yet “on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home” (“Paris” 156). In “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” Benjamin sets forth a dialectic of art and industry that parallels Germaine Dulac’s in The Smiling Madame Beudet and her Ciné-club lectures on the film. Benjamin’s protagonist, Baudelaire, like Dulac’s Madame Beudet and Woolf’s narrator in “Street Haunting,” is a site for examining this dialectic. Moreover, Benjamin’s text (an early expose of his Arcades Project) stylistically embodies the lyric narrative dialectics that it investigates in the tensions of art and industry.

After the First World War, Benjamin’s criticism shifted to a new metaphysical philosophy, one that crosses disciplinary borders and expands the object of criticism from the literary text. A film, a city, an allegory, a woman’s dress, a social structure, a toy are all texts to be read, and the Arcades Project aspires to read them together, dialectically. In pursuit of such a new direction for criticism, Benjamin’s work often takes the standpoint of a Baudelairean flâneur, a trope which provides a surrogate for the reader to both inhabit and yet critically consider. Benjamin, like Woolf’s narrator, links Baudelaire’s flâneur model with the model of the cinematic eye; their explorations of this trope show that it attracts precisely for its ability to offer a narrative progression and

41 H.D. also uses this trope in the film reviews she wrote for the film journal Close Up.
contingent setting simultaneously with lyric departures that explore more abstract
cones—psychological, metaphysical, historical, aesthetic.

Benjamin’s analysis of the poet and his work is particularly applicable to Dulac’s
representation of Madame Beudet’s interpretation of Baudelaire’s text. Benjamin sees
the genius of Baudelaire in his allegory, “which is fed on melancholy,” and which “draws
its strength from the rebellious emotionalism” of the “petit bourgeoisie” who have
emerged from bohemianism and occupy a place of economic uncertainty (“Paris” 156-7).
Dulac emphasizes the intellectual bohemianism of Madame Beudet and her melancholy,
due in large part to her uncertain economic position as a woman. Madame Beudet, a
psychically rather than physically mobile flâneur, recalls the Baudelairean protagonist in
her relative androgyny as well. In “Convolute J: [Baudelaire],” Benjamin includes
Baudelaire’s own description of Madame Bovary (whom Madame Beudet clearly is an
allusion to in Dulac’s film) as a “strange androgynous creature,” “most forceful, most
ambitious, and also most contemplative in her nature,” and for whom “All intellectual
women will be grateful to [Flaubert] for having raised the female to so high a level . . .
and for having made her share in that combination of calculation and reverie which
constitutes the perfect being” (J5,4: 237).

Dulac’s use of Baudelaire’s poem exposes how the intellectual woman’s
“combination of calculation and reverie” within the confines of a materialist, bourgeois,
and patriarchal culture hardly creates a perfect being. In reassessing Dulac’s “La Mort
des amants” montage, I want to emphasize its ambiguity. Such an ambiguity of meaning
is achieved by Germaine Dermoz’s expressive and restrained acting,\textsuperscript{42} as well as by Dulac’s lighting of the corresponding objects, and the measured pace of the montage of illuminated text—facial expression—illuminated object that is facilitated by fades in and out. Benjamin writes, “[a]mbiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill” (“Paris” 157). Not coincidentally, the lyric moments of the lyric narratives I have examined share this ambiguity. Indeed, Phelan’s definition of lyric builds upon Susan Stanford Friedman’s in which lyric is “a mode that foregrounds a simultaneity, a cluster of feelings or ideas that projects a gestalt in stasis,” by adding the clarification that lyric tends to suspend “internal judgments of characters (and narrators)” \textit{(Narrative} 31, 33).\textsuperscript{43} In lyric narrative, audiences see “the law of dialectics […] at a standstill” (Benjamin, “Paris” 157). The most powerful moments of these texts not only represent but also reproduce the experience of a “standstill,” a sudden awareness of time simultaneous with a sense of being momentarily outside of time. According to Benjamin, such lyric departures from conventional narrative progression often take place at the site of “the dialectical image” (“Paris” 157).

In Dulac’s fantasy sequences, Madame Beudet’s imaginative compositions are sparked by “the pure commodity” (a magazine advertisement, the prostitute/poet’s text) as the “dream image” (“Paris” 157). The tragicomedy the viewers see in Madame

\textsuperscript{42} According to Betancourt, Germaine Dermoz asked Dulac how to project the intensity of her role, and Dulac replied, “Only think, only experience your reactions without moving a muscle in your face. You must be like glass in your acting, as one with the rhythm of the images and with your thoughts” (122).

\textsuperscript{43} In \textit{Living to Tell About It}, Phelan explains that in the lyric mode, “the authorial audience is less in the position of observer and judge and more in the position of participant. While we recognize that the speaker is different from us, we move from that recognition toward fusion with the speaker,” and this suspended judgment and participation characteristic of lyricality “also depends on the absence of distance between the implied author and the ‘I’ of the poem” (162).
Beudet’s flights of fantasy inspired by the modern object is their banality (the phantom lover in tennis whites). It is a dual vision that Madame Beudet shares with audiences in the lyric moments of standstill that follow these fantasy flights, when she contemplates her own life as if from a distance, literally reflected in Baudelaire’s poetry or a mirror. According to Benjamin, this drive toward the banal “new” is part of the bourgeois flâneur’s journey toward “death.” The “false consciousness” of novelty has its origin in “images produced by the collective unconscious”: “The illusion of novelty is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the illusion of perpetual sameness” (157; emphasis added).

4.6 Twin Mirrors: Dulac’s Self-Reflexive Lyric Narrative

The key moments of “standstill” in The Smiling Madame Beudet take place before two mirrors. In both moments, both the character and viewer are called to question how the illusion of novelty can engender perpetual sameness (the status quo) as well as how a break from perpetual sameness may be illusory. Importantly, in neither of these moments does Dulac use “trick” photography or metaphorical images to suggest her protagonist’s interiority. Rather, in each, the viewer has already participated in a succession of subjective lyric departures and the disappointment of a return to prosaic narrative. However, in these subsequent lyric moments, the rhythm of the preceding lyric and narrative devices and the sudden sense of bareness (the device laid bare, and a lack of any intervening devices) allows the viewer to feel with Madame Beudet directly as well as to paradoxically identify with the filmmaker at some distance from the protagonist. The first moment occurs after the montage of text-subject-object when Madame Beudet has cast down the book of Baudelaire’s poems and then gazes into a large mirror, resting her
head on the dome of a clock. The second moment occurs on the following morning, when the frantic narrative pace of the film inexplicably grinds to a standstill in the infamous shot of Madame Beudet sitting before a three-sided mirror brushing her hair. In these two moments, audiences seem to step outside of the narrative with Madame Beudet, foreseeing with her the inevitable end of the drama—“perpetual sameness”—and her place as a product “reflect[ed in] the phantasmagoria of ‘cultural history,’ in which the bourgeoisie savors its false consciousness to the last” (Benjamin “Paris” 158).

These two moments submit Madame Beudet’s paradox for the audience’s contemplation rather than judgment, since we are made to feel simultaneously “with” the protagonist and with the composer beyond the protagonist in these moments. My reading is thus counter to prevailing readings of this scene which interpret Madame Beudet’s expression as consonant with a dramatic narrative progression. Flitterman-Lewis follows Abel who writes of this image, “Self wars against self in the tense calm of immobile replicated faces. Will M. Beudet play his suicide joke now? Will he find the revolver loaded? Should she try to reach the revolver first and unload it? Should she confess her guilt?” (344). Fortunately, both Abel and Flitterman-Lewis reproduce the image of this moment in their texts, an image which patently belies the notion that Madame Beudet might be contemplating this series of questions. Indeed, Abel places the image beside the penultimate image of the film, in which Monsieur Beudet mistakenly believes she has tried to kill herself—her cold expression in this shot is nearly identical to her expression before the triple mirror (see fig. 4.1). Madame Beudet’s look suggests rather a tiger’s leap outside of the confines of her dramatic narrative—she seems to disdain both the frantic concern of her dramatic action (the gun) and the seeming alternative of her fantasy flights
(which do not alter her prosaic reality). What Madame Beudet is thinking in this moment is radically ambiguous; given her expression, however, whatever she is thinking appears entirely other than what might be conventionally expected.

Fig. 4.1 Madame Beudet before her mirror, Madame and Monsieur near the end of *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (rpt. in Abel 343).

In these moments, Madame Beudet’s gaze, and her cold expression of encountering the banal, evokes a *flâneur* who has by some “suggestive magic” managed to look through a window and view her own life. Madame Beudet’s cultivated subjectivity is entrapped by the economy that has enabled its cultivation; she can forge no life outside of this pervasive patriarchal economy, but neither can her subjectivity survive within it. The self-reflexive devices of these scenes—the emphasis on seeing and mirrors, Madame Beudet’s cinematic powers of imagination—point to the film’s allegory of cinema as “the seventh art,” whose “soul” and “intellectual meaning” are entrapped by audiences’ customary “bad kind of cinematic optic” (Dulac, “The Visual Idea” 36-37). The “*parodie du suicide*” is as much a private joke between the audience and Dulac as between the Beudets; it is Madame Beudet’s creative life and the creative life of the cinema that are killed by inches.
Judith Mayne’s incisive analysis of Dulac’s use of “primitive” narration underscores Dulac’s self-reflexivity. As Mayne writes, Dulac portrays Madame Beudet’s fantasies “in a ‘primitive’ mode. She is like the dreamers in early films who imagine fictional characters coming to life as they nod over a book, or like the conjuror in a Méliès film who makes threatening objects [usually female] disappear” (194). Dulac, however, portrays Madame Beudet “in a far more complex way than […] her fantasies,” thus creating a distance “between how the woman’s fantasy life is represented and how she is portrayed [by Dulac] in relationship to it” (194). The distance Mayne describes here, engendered by Dulac’s ironic juxtaposition of “narrative modes” (194), may also be described as a distance between the mimetic and synthetic dimensions (the tensions of the text’s story-characters and author-audience dynamics) that Dulac draws viewers to contemplate. As a lyric narrative, Dulac’s film uses “primitivism” not in order to dismantle or bracket narrative, but in order to bring viewers into a “reconceptualization” of cinematic narrative (Mayne 183).

In drawing viewers to critically re-see the conventions of a (largely non-narrative) “primitive” cinema within the frame of a classic bourgeois melodrama through an avant-garde practice which subverts the frames of conventional cinema, Dulac offers a tableaux of the fetters restraining the development of cinema and social equity. Dulac’s use of the three-sided mirror (and the three different mirrors in the film) points to the reconceptualization of two cinematic frames—the “primitive” lyric departures of Madame Beudet’s fantasies and the illusions of melodrama’s conventional narratives—within Dulac’s avant-garde deconstructive frame. In “The Visual Idea,” Dulac exposes how cinema’s development since its primitive beginnings has meant the current
dominance of a “bad optic”: this limited set of conventions was perpetuated out of “economic pressures” during the evolution of the new “mechanical invention” since it was used as a “recording device” of the conventional literary narratives of existing arts (36-7). Dulac wrote in 1925, “The Cinema, as we conceive it today, is nothing but the mirror for the other arts. Well, it is too big a thing to remain only a mirror, it must be freed from its chains and be given its true personality” (“Visual Idea” 37). Dulac’s choice of Baudelaire’s poem, then, is ironic both mimetically and synthetically:

“The Death of Lovers”

We shall have beds full of subtle perfumes,
Divans as deep as graves, and on the shelves
Will be strange flowers that blossomed for us
Under more beautiful heavens.

Using their dying flames emulously,
Our two hearts will be two immense torches
Which will reflect their double light
In our two souls, those twin mirrors.

Some evening made of rose and of mystical blue
A single flash will pass between us
Like a long sob, charged with farewells;

And later an Angel, setting the doors ajar,
Faithful and joyous, will come to revive
The tarnished mirrors, the extinguished flames. (emphasis added)

The twin mirrors of “primitive” and conventional narrative cinema perish in a heroic consummation in Dulac’s text. Dulac comes as “an Angel,” not to commemorate the dead, but to awaken viewers from their slumber (the “unaesthetic eye” that “sleeps”) by asking them to see, in the “flash” or shock of her breaking of these frames, their investment in conventional illusions.
Critics have commented on the daringness of Dulac’s scene of Madame Beudet at her dressing table mirror, commending Dulac for exposing the “ravaged” face of Madame Beudet (Sadoul 350). Further, feminist critics have rightly noted the revolutionary territory the scene explores: audiences contemplate a woman contemplating herself in a way that does not suggest “vanity” or an exhibitionist appeal to the male gaze (as had been conventional in male-authored pictorial arts in which women are represented gazing into mirrors).44 In Dulac’s film, woman contemplating herself (a triptych of herself—importantly locating this image of the mirror between the first and final depictions of the study’s mirrors in the film) does not prompt the audience’s judgment. Indeed, the critical narrative action of the film is bizarrely suspended.

Madame Beudet has heretofore been depicted as nearly hysterical in her “Remorse…..”; the superimposed swinging pendulum over a shot of Madame Beudet holding her head not only re-invokes her husband and an oppressive clock time, but also suggests her emotional swing between remorse for her deed and a loathing of her husband. The faster tempo of the subsequent shots of Madame Beudet in her room and Dermoz’s suddenly over-expressive acting—looking vindictively at the intruding maid and demanding her to pour two drinks, shaking out her hair, collapsing in her chair, rushing to the door to listen to Monsieur Beudet below with Monsieur Lebas—suggest a more conventional narrative progression, a focus on dramatic tension with a heroine verging on a state of “delirium” (Abel 343). However, Dulac’s long take of Madame Beudet as she finally sits before her mirror, coldly brushing out her long loose hair, cuts

44 See Whitney Chadwick’s Women, Art, and Society. The emphasis on Madame Beudet’s relationship to the three mirrors of the film does invite a reading using Freud’s theorization of narcissism, but not a reductive reading of narcissism in its pejorative connotation.
away from such a narrative progression. This activation and frustration of audiences’ narrative expectations suggests that Dulac uses this moment of the film to convey her purpose, to visually express a character’s psychology and persuade viewers to want to explore the possibilities that the seventh art holds in that direction. In “Visual and Anti-Visual Films,” Dulac expresses this film’s portrayal of the dialectic of narrative expectation and departure: “The cinema can certainly tell a story, but you have to remember that the story is nothing. The story is a surface,” whereas the “seventh art […] is depth rendered perceptible […] it is the musical ungraspable” (34). What makes the moment before the mirror so striking is Dulac’s success not only in departing from a linear narrative progression, but also in persuading viewers of the value of lyric in narrative, as the lyric departure she portrays, modernist rather than romantic, is breathtaking.

While I agree with Flitterman-Lewis’s description of Madame Beudet’s contemplation before her triple mirror is “an image of arresting beauty,” I disagree with her characterization of Dermoz’s expression here as fitting seamlessly with a linear narrative progression: “she considers, in remorse and desperation, how to slip undetected into her husband’s study” (134). Instead, it is more accurate to describe her expression and slow gesture of pulling the brush through her hair as vacant and distant—foreshadowing her expression in the last shot we see of her; the question of the loaded gun seems secondary to Madame Beudet here, not unlike the question of action in Hamlet’s soliloquy.45 Nonetheless, Flitterman-Lewis does go on to focus on how this

45  Barbara Everett makes this point as she describes the “formal spiral” of Hamlet as characteristically “suspend[ing] action and stop[ping] clocks in this way, interrupting or replacing
image disrupts “the masculine mode of visual pleasure in an activity that disperses and problematizes that very image” in refusing to “simply generate an image of female beauty constructed in masculine terms” (134). What is necessary is to then emphasize the narrative disruption as calling attention to itself; the image simultaneously problematizes “dominant articulations of femininity and their structures of the gaze” (Flitterman-Lewis 134) and problematizes cinematic narrative structure and audience expectations.

The mirror’s “tripartite framing” (Flitterman-Lewis 134) as well as the desolation and complexity of Madame’s expression prompt viewers to see from two viewpoints in addition to their own unique standpoint as individual audience members. Viewers see with Madame Beudet, sharing her ability to see herself not only as others see her but also as she knows herself. Viewers also see with the female filmmaker Dulac, as the camera angle from over Madame Beudet’s shoulder intimates, able to see how both the conventional structures of cinematic narrative and gendered social narratives condemn the protagonist. In inserting this lyric moment of standstill in the dramatic narrative progression, Dulac focuses viewers on the potential of cinema to capture the complexity of subjectivity and a culture’s “unconscious optics” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 236).

This frustration of expectations is reinforced by plot progression as well. When morning arrives, it briefly seems as if Monsieur might comprehend his wife’s loneliness
and sense of entrapment. Although viewers have seen his unsympathetic dream of Marguerite (dreaming as he sleeps in a chair beside their bed, he reaches out a hand to grasp the imagined Marguerite’s legs), when he rises he gazes repentantly at his sleeping wife and moves to kiss her hair, but she opens her eyes and glares. Monsieur retreats, thoughtfully walking downstairs to work, the cat perched on his shoulder. Above, Madame experiences “Remorse…..” This tentative sympathy is heightened by the journey of the cat from Monsieur, who has been tenderly stroking the cat sitting in a chair beside the table with the vase of flowers, up the stairs to Madame, who calls to and caresses the cat desperately while sitting on their bedside. The conventionally desired happily-ever-after seems possible and even likely. All that is needed is for Madame Beudet to rush downstairs and unload the gun, perhaps with a tearful confession and Monsieur’s beneficent forgiveness.

However, it is here that Dulac inserts the moment of standstill. Madame drops the cat and rushes to the door to listen to her husband and Monsieur Lebas enter the study below; rather than rushing down the stairs, she turns wearily to her dressing table and sits before the mirror. Intercut with the shots of Madame Beudet’s introspective gazing are Monsieur’s search for a lost check below—which moves from relatively benign jokes at the expense of his wife (he denigrates her taste and is shown grotesquely laughing in slow motion at her music) to violent antagonism (he pounds on the piano and rages). A shot of Madame Beudet shows her coldly staring into space and filing her nails. An intertitle quotes her husband, “Women: Do you know what’s to be done with them?…”

46 This device of the cat for creating sympathy between husband and wife, evocative of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, appears prominently in Kenneth Macpherson’s *Borderline*. 
In a medium shot, Madame stonily finishes buttoning her dress. Below, Monsieur Beudet has snatched a doll from her shelf, raising his hand as if to strike, while Monsieur Lebas empathetically reaches out for it. Having unwittingly broken it with his fist, Monsieur Beudet considers the broken doll’s head and uneasily places it in a coat pocket. Dulac cuts to a medium close up of Madame Beudet breathing fast; while the next shot shows her agitation comes from hearing the men exit the study, for a moment it seems as if she has felt her husband’s displaced violence. Nonetheless, despite Monsieur’s raging over the mismanaged accounts and her own intent ambivalence, Madame Beudet does finally rush down to the study to secretly unload the gun. Interrupted, she flees the room.

Monsieur Beudet is again shown sympathetically, but only for a moment as he examines the doll’s head again and then his own hands. Wiping his hands on his coat, he then brusquely rearranges Madame Beudet’s music and the vase of flowers; he calls his wife into the study and treats her as a child (gesturing her away from the desk and to her side of the room) as he questions her regarding his ledger. An intertitle announces, “It’s what you deserve!” when Monsieur Beudet picks up the loaded revolver and aims it at Madame Beudet, or rather, the camera.

A fast cut montage follows: Madame Beudet recoils in horror, grasping her head; a wavering wide shot of Monsieur with the gun; a close up of the gun firing; a mantle vase hit by the bullet falls; and the cat darts up the hall stair. Monsieur Beudet rushes to his wife, draws her down into her chair, kneels beside her and looks first at the gun and then at her, saying incredulously, “So you would like to kill yourself…..” Madame Beudet’s expression registers hardened revulsion as he clasps her tighter, “How can I live without you?” Oblivious to the more logical deduction that she has attempted his life,
Monsieur buries his face against her bosom and rocks to and fro slightly. Above and behind them in this long shot, two Punch and Judy puppets appear above the frame of the large mirror, similarly embracing. A two-dimensional curtain falls over the puppets, the curtain fades to a dark surface, and the illuminated word “THEATRE” appears across it.

As Joan Braverman has noted, this satiric device foregrounds the film itself as a mirror: “the implicit joke of the mirror’s double illusionism as an autonomous object” is further underscored by the framing of “THEATRE” within the cinematic frame (qtd. in Heck-Rabi 38). Braverman rightly ties the film’s critique of filmic conventions (the evocation of and departure from theatrical illusionism) with the film’s critique of patriarchal social conventions (the trajectory of the narrative of the heroine). As her desolate expression in this shot makes clear, Madame Beudet did not desire the sentimental resolution that her husband embraces, as it is a resolution that condemns her to the sentence of “always the same horizons….” Moreover, the diegetic rupture of the Punch and Judy device is double-voiced; it can be read as an expression of Madame Beudet’s own sardonic interpretation of the scene (a final sardonic return to the “primitive” fantasy narration she has taken part in previously), or it can be read as the omniscient narrator’s or implied author’s commentary. By not only refusing “diegetic absorption” and generic expectations of closure but also in parodying those conventions, Dulac invites audiences to identify with her and engage in a “reconceptualization” of narrative (Mayne 183).

The *mise-en-scène* of the characters at the close of the film punctuates the dead-end of fantasmic escape for Madame Beudet. “In the provinces…,” the film’s introductory intertitle is repeated at the end as if to finish its introductory sentence: “In
the quiet streets, without horizon, under the heavy sky…. Joined together by habit.” Abel describes this final “realistic image” (as opposed to the fantasmic earlier images) as shutting viewers off from identification with Madame Beudet, while also defining her condition “in a provincial, sexist, church-oriented, bourgeois society—as unchanging, without future, without escape” (344). Several shots follow that echo the film’s opening shots of the provincial streets, which have also been repeated during the morning sequence before Madame Beudet rises. Dulac then cuts to a long shot of Monsieur and Madame Beudet turning the corner of a cobbled street which stretches up and out of the shot; the right of the screen is dominated by a wall of the same dark stone as the deserted street that fills up the left side. The couple passes a priest as they turn the corner; Monsieur greets him and moves towards his wife so that she veers onto the sidewalk and she is further restricted to the space between the wall and himself as they walk up the steep street. As Abel suggests, Dulac here plays genre off against genre, expectation off reality, as the bourgeois melodrama enters the realist streets, and this juxtaposition powerfully conveys a feminist critique. Lenora Penna Smith has argued that domestic rooms do not provide women with “protection from social practices shaping femininity” nor do they call for “development of an autonomous self; instead, they limit the women to roles sanctioned for them within their culture” (223). It is through a departure from the home and the taking up of another frame of reference (the flâneur of both the prosaic streets and poetic departure) that a relatively autonomous self can develop.

Similarly, as a medium, film has not primarily served as an “alternative space” (Smith 216) for modernist women’s development or expression of an autonomous self. In “The Imaginary Signifier,” Christian Metz notes the reciprocal relationship of the
“cinematic industry” and the “mental machinery” that make up the “cinematic institution” (7). Metz writes that spectators historically “internalize” into their psychic life industrial cinematic conventions and thus become adapted “to the consumption of films. The institution is outside us and inside us, indistinctly collective and intimate, sociological and psychoanalytic” (7). In the final sequences of *The Smiling Madame Beudet*, Dulac invites audiences to question the institutions they inhabit—the double illusionism of conventional cinematic narratives and patriarchal narratives. A notable break from the interior shots of the film occurs just before Madame Beudet sits before her mirror; Abel notes, “[a]bruptly, the level of narration turns omniscient,” as several shots of the streets indicate that the morning is growing later (343).47 In shifting to an omniscient narration that takes viewers outside of the setting of the bourgeois interior before the lyric moment of Madame Beudet before the triple mirror, Dulac inserts the possibility of a critical distance into what otherwise would be a seamless acceleration to the climax of a melodrama. The presence of Dulac as composer returns a third time in the final shots of the film: in the parodic rupture of the conventions of bourgeois melodrama and conventions of filmic illusionism via the mirror’s puppet theatre, as well as in the final shot which shows Madame Beudet out of doors, part of the “realist” shots of the streets at the opening and middle of the film. Whereas Madame Beudet is continuously limited to “the same horizons,” Dulac’s audiences are not. As Dulac had

---

47 Nonetheless, even here there is a pointed overlap in the viewpoints of Madame Beudet and of the author or omniscient narrator. The authorial shots—distant shots of workers dressed in dark clothes moving toward the town for work—seamlessly become subjective shots—a medium close up of boots walking on gravel, a shop front being hoisted, that are intercut with Madame Beudet hearing these sounds of morning.
tirelessly advocated, their influence determines the boundaries of the aesthetic possibilities of the cinematic industry, possibilities that also affect the social and psychoanalytic machinery that cinema reflects in its frame (Metz 7).

As in the lyric narratives examined in previous chapters, the close of this lyric narrative film is both self-reflexive and ambiguous. As a self-reflexive text, the ambiguity and implicit critique of Dulac’s conclusion extends to her own belief in the potential to productively balance the dialectic of art and industry. Madame Beudet’s dual vision of the poetic and prosaic—her imaginative life and the realities of her limited horizon—leads to a crisis that prompts her resistance. However, her resistance is relatively passive in its deference to contiguous realities. That is, she loads rather than fires the gun, since doing so would mean real imprisonment; moreover, she stays in the prison of her home rather than leaving, since doing so would likely mean a life of poverty. The consequence of her indirect resistance leads to a death-in-life for the life of her mind. The concluding shots of The Smiling Madame Beudet depicts her confined by the oppressive stone walls of the village, caught in the enclosures of patriarchy—literally toiling toward a closed-in horizon between her husband and a representative of the church. The possibilities of music and poetry seem nullified, as viewers see only the back of her head, lowered to concentrate on the uneven cobbles.

The conclusion of Dulac’s film, like H.D.’s HERmione and “Murex,” includes a warning in the female protagonist’s attempts to negotiate oppressive or restrictive realities and the seeming freedom of her creative life. The film does not advocate violence (as the presence of the “Courthouse and Prison” across the street reminds viewers) nor an absolute escape into an imaginative realm. Nonetheless, Madame’s
hardened expression as her husband embraces her warns viewers of the potentially equally damning consequence of an indirect resistance. Ironically (or perhaps not), the critique in Dulac’s film against the conventions of bourgeois melodrama are equally indirect, offering no forthright ideological alternative or didactic message of action.48 The film’s reception reflects this ambiguity. Critics of the avant-garde have faulted the film for the “trick” photography and Punch and Judy show’s mangling of an otherwise innovative bourgeois melodrama, while advocates of the avant-garde have slighted the film for its relatively linear narrative. In terms of resisting dominant film narratives, does the film itself mirror the dramatic conclusion it portrays? Is it possible for viewers to see only a happily-ever-after (as does Monsieur Beudet) by ignoring the film’s feminist critique and subversive integration of avant-garde techniques? Such a view would perpetuate the status quo of filmic and social expectations in the very audiences Dulac seeks to awaken.

Nonetheless, since the film was neither an unproblematical success as a popular film nor as an avant-garde film, it does seem that both audiences registered to some degree the film’s double-voicing. Looking back on her “psychological film” in 1932, Dulac could certainly affirm her success in holding in tension the poetic and prosaic, the “bare facts of the drama” and the “contradictory impressions in the course of an action,” the “facts” and the “moral state” (“Avant-Garde” 45). The audience, drawn to identify

48 Kaja Silverman shows that Hitchcock’s Psycho holds the system of suture “up to our scrutiny even as we find ourselves thoroughly ensnared by it” (212). Silverman turns to Althusser to explore the role of ideology in cinematic suture. She explains his metaphor of the mirror in “Brecht and Bertolazzi”: “When Althusser talks about breaking the mirror within which the subject finds a prefabricated identity, he does not mean to suggest that the subject thereby transcends ideology, but rather becomes aware of its operations” (217).
both with author and protagonist, finds that with this lyric narrative film, “a duality imperceptibly entered” cinematic form “a duality which […] adapted itself to the cadence of a rhythm” (Dulac 44). According to Dulac, the role of the avant-garde, “essential to the evolution of film,” is to first, “free the cinema from the hold of the existing arts,” and second, “bring it back to the considerations essential to it: movement, rhythm, life” (44). Films such as *The Smiling Madame Beudet* were an essential beginning for the avant-garde, since it confronted the “public and most of the film industrialists” with a defamiliarization of realism, melodrama, and a patriarchal viewpoint (45). From this beginning, Dulac would pursue the dual role of the avant-garde much further, toward the concept of a “pure cinema” of visual poetics in *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (47).
CHAPTER 5

INNERVATING THE EYE AND BRAIN

5.1 Benjamin’s “Surrealism,” Woolf’s “The Cinema,” Dulac’s Avant-Garde

Dulac marks 1924 as the year when “what is called avant-garde production,” dissociated from commercial production, began in earnest (“Avant-Garde” 46). Although the first avant-garde had attempted to work within the commercial sphere, more often than not the avant-garde passages of such films were “officially suppressed […] either by the producers or by the theatre-owners, who were anxious to spare the audience the shock or the displeasures brought on by a new technique of expressive images” (Dulac 46). Writing in 1932, Dulac explains that an optimistic economic climate and more open aesthetic field in the late 1920s enabled her to focus on the production of cinematic shocks, “boldly” taking audiences “toward the conquest of the new modes of expression which [the avant-garde] felt would serve to expand cinematic thought” (46). In *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, however, Dulac does not reject narrative entirely as some of her abstract films of “pure cinema” do (such as the subsequent *Themes et variations*, *Arabesques*, and *Disque 927*). Dulac’s use of a surrealist narrative in an artfully composed film allowed her to tentatively connect with her audience, a necessity in her
effort to “expand cinematic thought,” while testing the “proofs” of a “pure cinema” (47).

Abel describes the film’s deconstructive narrative:

Three characters recur and interact through a number of spaces, several of which are repeated. There is the odd little man in black, the clergyman (Alex Allin), who is the primary subject and agent of the action. His antagonist is a stereotype of convention and authority—a fierce-looking, pompous, heavily-decorated general (Lucien Bataille); and the persistent object of his desire is a lovely, full-gowned lady (Gênia Athanasiou) who seems allied with the general. (476)

In reviewing the era of pure cinema, Dulac describes its “proofs” as revealing the imperatives of “cinematic action” which are not the absolute other of narrative: it “must be life,” and it must also extend beyond “the human person” and “into the realm of nature and dream” (47). Dulac’s own work in pure cinema, anchored in a humanist vision, would extend into the realm of the dream in order to discover not only cinema’s “own esthetic in the contributions of the visual” but also how the “esthetic principle[s]” that “properly belong” to the cinema could discover what was unapprehended in the human apparatus—particularly in the construction of the social and the psychological (“Avant-Garde” 46).

Similarly, Benjamin’s dialectical image, the object discovered and transformed by the camera’s gaze, is the site of this probing of unconscious optics. In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin argues that the cinema opens up a new world for the flâneur by bursting open the “prison-world” of our habitual life, “[o]ur taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories,” in other words, the spaces of the nineteenth-century flâneur (236). With its “dynamite of the tenth of a second,” film expands space and extends movement beyond the habitual, “so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling”
Benjamin, like Woolf and Dulac, observes how the camera’s intervention prompts the unarmed eye to re-see its world, to call on the mind for help: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man” (236-37). Likewise, Antonin Artaud, the writer of Dulac’s scenario, writes of the camera’s transformation of “the driest and most banal image”:

> The smallest detail, the most insignificant objects take on a meaning and a life which is theirs alone, aside from the meaning of the images themselves, or the thought they translate and the symbol which they constitute. […] A leaf, a bottle, a hand, etc. are imbued with a quasi-animal life which begs to be used. […] The virtual power in the images searches out in the depths of the mind possibilities as yet unused. (49)

While the camera ostensibly focuses on a body or an object, it is into the depths of the perceiving subject that the audience goes exploring, as the film “reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 236). Dulac echoes Benjamin’s thesis that cinema, which can show the “unconscious” movements of our immediate world, such as the growth of a grain of wheat, a horse’s leap (Dulac’s examples) or such as a person’s act of reaching for a lighter, a body’s posture in taking a stride (Benjamin’s examples), could and should also be used to reveal psychological movement—the “ungraspable” of “thought” and “feelings” (“Anti-Visual” 34).

The questions and aims of pure cinema as described by Dulac are also strikingly consonant with Woolf’s aims in finding a new form for the novel, particularly in writing *The Waves* (begun in the late twenties, published in 1931). Just as Woolf sought an inhuman vantage in the interludes of *The Waves* and “Time Passes” in *To the Lighthouse*, Dulac characterizes pure cinema’s advocates as the “school of the ungraspable,” “in...
search of emotion beyond the limits of the human, to everything that exists in nature, to the invisible, the imponderable” (47). The poetics of “scientific writings” and the cinematic lens capable of capturing “the infinitely large and the infinitely small” could dictate a new and moving “rhythm” for cinema, an alternative to the progression dictated by sources in drama and nineteenth-century realist narratives (47). In *The Waves*, Woolf finds a similar new rhythm for the novel, one that moves between the infinite and selfless gaze of the interludes—“The waves broke on the shore” (297)—to the very particular and personal gaze of the lyric utterances of her six characters. The novel’s back and forth rhythm, emphasis on a musical structure, and concern to represent the social and psychological apparatuses that constitute the subject through poetic composition make a salient parallel with Dulac’s *The Seashell and the Clergyman*.

Surrealist author Antonin Artaud conceived of this film as “related to the mechanism of a dream without actually being a dream itself. [It seeks to] restore the pure work of thought” (qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 118). The film focuses on the interactions of a clergyman, a general, and a woman; lustful, the clergyman pursues the beautiful woman and, thwarted, struggles against the general. Artaud’s discontent with Dulac’s film is partly attributable to Dulac’s emphasis on composition; while the film is evocative of a dream-like structure, its unfolding reveals the presence of a composer (Artaud’s discontent might be attributable moreover to the fact that the presence of an implied author pointed to Dulac rather than himself). The clergyman manipulates significant objects during the shifting scenarios—a wide flat shell that fills with a liquid, a key, a globe that is placed on a pedestal and which contains the woman’s head and then his own. Doors, water, corridors, and desolate rooms are also circulating images that
function like musical phrases. Unlike a dream or a surrealist prose poem, Dulac’s ordering of these scenarios and images evokes (although often atonally) harmonies, symmetry, and composition.

In an article “The Image and the Spark: Dulac and Artaud Reviewed,” Flitterman-Lewis argues that, because of her symbolist-inflected aesthetic, Dulac uses these images:

- for their isolated evocative value in the film (and the representation of dream content that this implies), while Artaud’s scenario concentrating on the structure of the dream, intended emphasis to be placed on the connections between the images and sequences (and the violation of cinematic continuity that this necessitates). (118)

However, Dulac’s use of the images serves the dual purpose of exploring the structure of the dream and creating a musical progression for the cinema. Flitterman-Lewis holds that Artaud’s desire to “shock” and “break through language in order to touch life” was in opposition to Dulac’s symbolist aesthetics which uses poetic images for “flights of fantasy” (“Image” 123). However, as Dulac’s theoretical writings and the film itself show, Dulac’s impetus to create a cinema that would “touch” the eye (“Anti-Visual” 32) and her support of the avant-garde as a “living ferment” (“Avant-Garde” 48) hardly suggest a fanciful symbolism. Rather, Dulac used surrealist aims as she had symbolist and impressionist aesthetics, strategically, as means to foster a new art and expand its potential. Dulac calls for a cinematic “symphonic poem, where emotion bursts forth,” a cinema that is “strip[ped] of all those elements which did not properly belong to it” (“Avant-Garde” 47).

The dream structure in Dulac’s film is fraught with the “shocks” of discontinuity editing, intrusions of the “real,” and the ambiguity of the connections created in the images’ recurrence, yet it also achieves a poetic composition. In other words, it achieves
the perspective of Benjamin’s “dialectical optic,” prompting us to see the “en état de surprise,” “the mysterious” within “the everyday world” (“Surrealism” 189-90). By combining poetic composition (the mediating mind Benjamin associates with “[t]he reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur”) with the shocks of the unconscious (experienced by “the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic”), Dulac’s film moves toward the “profane illumination” (“Surrealism” 50). It thus does not contradict Artaud’s surrealist vision for The Seashell and the Clergyman: “To understand this film it is enough to […] abandon oneself to plastic, objective, and attentive examination of the inner self which was to this day the exclusive domain of the ‘Illuminated’” (Artaud 50). Dulac’s film is an attempt to have the shock (the surrealist illumination) and the poetic composition (contemplative appreciation of the illumination), too.

Although the The Seashell and the Clergyman and The Waves are experimental texts that have accrued reputations of abstraction, Woolf’s novel and Dulac’s film do tell stories; however, they shift the emphasis from story (narrative) to exploring the process of vision (lyric). Dulac writes that “the school of the ungraspable” was foremost “attacked because it scorned the story to latch onto suggestive impression and expression and because it enveloped the viewer in a network, not of events to follow, but of sensation to experience and to feel” (“Avant-Garde” 47). That is, the anti-climax, or perhaps payoff, of these narratives are their ability to consistently suspend audiences in a lyric mode. Contemporary reactions of audiences to these works were nearly always passionate, either in praise for their startling achievements of poetic or symphonic composition in prose or film, or in violent condemnation for the texts’ subordination of story. The shock of the recurring lyric mode in narrative is precisely the point for both
Woolf and Dulac; story is made secondary to the reader’s or viewer’s experience of a lyric vision, as audiences are “enveloped” in a “network.” Curiously, the networks of images or musical themes that make up Woolf’s and Dulac’s texts have a considerable overlap, for example, the image of a “globe” that is shattered, the distance created in a view of the sea that is juxtaposed with a character’s attempt to reproduce the sea between his or her hands, and the use of fashion to comment on a gendered typology. By disavowing the illusionism of conventions of “realistic” narratives while refusing as well the “histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious” as in more conventional (if that term can be used) surrealist work, these mediated texts are able to draw us in to critically explore the realities and illusions that structure our vision in daily life (Benjamin, “Surrealism” 189-90).

Although Woolf traveled in France, admired French painting, was prominently translated and published in France, and drew deeply on a French literary tradition, it seems unlikely that Woolf saw Dulac’s films. Woolf rarely attended “movies” and few avant-garde films were available in Britain. Moreover, according to the Film Society’s programme for March 16, 1930, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* was banned from public exhibition by the British Board of Film Censors because it “is so cryptic as to be almost meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable” (Rotha 86). Nonetheless, as Hankins has argued, had Woolf known of her work, she would likely have chosen Dulac as a “director of choice” not only for *Mrs. Dalloway* (“Hot Flashes” 31) but also for her most experimental novel. From the perspective of classical Hollywood cinema, *The Waves* seems the least likely of Woolf’s texts to be translated to the screen, but it seems that the idea had crossed Woolf’s mind. In January 1933, Woolf
notes in her diary, “Wogan said The Waves shd. be filmed: I in my vague way, said V. Isham wants to do it,” but discovered later that “she meant to broadcast” (D 4: 140).

Dulac’s attention to the image as a means of pushing closer to the “thing itself” (D 3: 104) would have coincided with Woolf’s attempt at the “musical ungrasparable” in prose (Dulac, “Anti-visual” 34). My point in arguing that Dulac would be Woolf’s director of choice is to show how both were essentially tackling a similar aesthetic problem: Woolf sought to write a new novel that would say those things that could not be said, and Dulac sought to create a new kind of film, “the film that cannot be told” (“Anti-visual” 34). Woolf, although certainly a neophyte, did express in writing her own views on cinema as a new art form.1 Her essay “The Cinema”—published with slight variations in New York’s Arts (June 1926) and London’s Nation & Athenaeum (July 1926) and in the New Republic (August 1926) as “The Movies and Reality”—articulates a view consonant with Dulac’s anti-literary avant-garde direction for film. Woolf uses the article not only to comment upon the potential of the new art, but also to consider the overlapping territories of avant-garde cinema and her own experimental prose work.

In “The Cinema,” Woolf describes the possible scope of film by emphasizing its ability to convey the visual residue of emotion that escapes painter and poet (E 4: 351). Like Dulac, Woolf diagnoses the curious difficulty that the new art faces due to its arrival at an advanced stage of civilization when the other arts are so fully developed. Whereas

---

1 In Feminism and Film, Maggie Humm argues that “The Cinema” is a key essay in film theory of the 1920s and “perhaps the first British essay to describe cinema as avant-garde” (159). While I certainly agree that it is a key essay in film theory, I do not want to suggest that Woolf was a spokesperson of the cinematic avant-garde given her relatively small contact with film circles. Ciné-clubs had spread to Britain by the mid twenties and a number of writers wrote against censorship, the backwardness of British film production, and organized in order to show banned films—such as Dulac’s and Eisenstein’s.
Dulac describes the seventh art in shackles to the literary and dramatic arts, Woolf (from the perspective of a novelist) describes cinema as a predator. With literary art readily offering its help of famous novels to the new medium, the “cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results have been disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural” (E 4: 350). Woolf’s hyperbole here is not meant to fault the cinema as a medium; indeed, cinema’s wolfish beginning is the fault of capitalism and the shackles of convention. Reechoing her own argument for women’s needs in writing a new kind of novel, Woolf argues on behalf of those filmmakers who “want to be […] making an art of their own” (E 4: 350).

Using the metonymy that she will explore in her story-essay “Street Haunting,” Woolf explains the “unnatural” alliance of cinema and literary narratives as a conflict between “the eye” and “the brain” (E 4: 350). When presented with a film adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, the brain rejects the Anna that the eye presents: “For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind—her charm, her passion, her despair, whereas all the emphasis is now laid upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet” (E 4: 350). Popular cinema proceeds by telling a materialist story that reduces to one dimension the world’s complex and famous novels (E 4: 350). Cinema must be allowed to discover “its own devices,” its own language, since at present it spells out these novels “in words of one syllable written in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A smashed chair is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse” (E 4: 350). What devices are within cinema’s scope then? What relationship would be the most productive for eye and brain? Woolf’s argument parallels her argument for a new direction for
fiction: what is wanted is a creative hand that brings together the poetic and the prosaic and an audience open to the shocks and flights of a new angle of vision.

It is the propensity of that audience, however, to reject all but commonplace narrative or titillating spectacle that has created cinema’s present backwardness. Woolf writes that “the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye, is a simple mechanism,” that “licks […] up” the “sweetmeat” spectacles of newsreels (royalty, a yacht, sporting events) and is happy to settle “down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think” (E 4: 348-9). However, when this mechanism is made to call upon the brain for help—“The eye says to the brain, ‘Something is happening which I do not in the least understand. You are needed’”—and they look together at “the King, the boat, the horse,” then the brain registers a poetic quality in the moving image (E 4: 349). Here, in attempting to describe the effect of the brain and eye looking together, Woolf also approaches what Jean Epstein and others have called the photogénie, the semi-mystical or alchemical power of the dialectical image. Woolf, pointing out the deficiency of our critical language in this new art, thus attempts to expand that language and reveal the importance of a cinema that places eye and brain in a productive tension. Her investment in doing so lies in rousing audiences from their “agreeable somnolence” to awaken to lyric narrative innovation in both arts (E 4: 349). The unique power of cinema is its dialectical optic. Gliding delicately close to the term “surreal,” Woolf nonetheless refrains, since the term might unbalance her emphasis on the dialectic of the real of the audience and the real on the screen. The cinema’s images, writes Woolf, “have taken on a quality” different from real life or from “the simple photograph,” becoming
not more beautiful, in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life. We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it” (*E 4: 349; emphasis added).  

The cinema holds out the stunning potential of the lyric moment, precisely the vantage that Woolf attempts in her fiction in the alternation of a human perspective and an inhuman or “immune” perspective. This potential of the lyric moment, moreover, lies in the audience’s lyric reception—a moment contemplated without judgment but with an impersonal ethic of care. Woolf continues,

As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence, its cares, its conventions. The horse will not knock us down. The King will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet. Watching the antics of our kind from this post of vantage we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalize […] watching boats sail and waves break we have time to open the whole of our mind wide to beauty and to register on top of this the queer sensation—beauty will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not. (*E 4: 349)

The brain, registering the image within the temporal frame of cinema which seems to fix the transient, finds a further profound meaning in what the eye witnesses. The scenes watched have “happened, we are told, ten years ago,” before “[t]he war opened its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance. But it was thus we danced and pirouetted” (*E 4: 349). That is, it is not the image in and of itself that is of value, but what “[t]he brain adds [to] all this [that] the eye sees upon the screen” (*E 4: 349).

Since Woolf disapproves of the literary offerings of popular cinema, what kind of art does “The Cinema” call for? It seems that Woolf would approve of the French realist and Soviet cinema, since they would take as their subject “the wonders of the actual world, flights of gulls, or ships on the Thames; the fascination of contemporary life—the
Mile End Road, Piccadilly Circus” (E 4: 349). Glimpsing such scenes in newsreels seems to have provided the foundation for Woolf’s vision of the lyric potential of the cinema described above. Given the crudities of Anna Karenina in popular cinema, Woolf proposes an impressionist cinema. If we stopped “trying to connect the pictures with the book,” then in “some scene by the way—a gardener mowing the lawn outside, for example, or a tree shaking its branches in the sunshine,” we might see “what the cinema might do” (E 4: 350). Finally, however, Woolf argues for a kind of pure cinematic language, paradoxically glimpsed at a screening of Dr Caligari. Rather than commenting on this radical film of German expressionism at all, Woolf writes of an accident in the projection: “a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged and sank back into nonentity,” seeming to “embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic’s brain” (E 4: 350). In this accident, Woolf sees a language proper to cinema alone: “For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement ‘I am afraid’” (E 4: 350).

Although in this version, Woolf simply proposes these as sources for filmmakers, in the variant of “The Cinema,” Woolf’s tone is more sardonic. She points out that “picture-makers seem dissatisfied with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the suggestiveness of reality. They despise the flight of gulls, ships on the Thames, the Prince of Wales, the Mile End Road, Piccadilly Circus” (E 4: 592-3). This mocking tone suggests Woolf is thinking of her own successful narrative innovation in To The Lighthouse in which an entire chapter is devoted to the “passage of time.” In “Time Passes” the reader is given in-depth descriptions of the effects of time upon a house, the vagaries of weather, the texture of light, and the efforts of cleaning women (a precursor to the interludes in The Waves); however, death, marriage, war, and literature are relegated to brief, bracketed sentences, incongruous intertitles.

The wriggling blot, it should be emphasized, conveys a meaning to Woolf—“I am afraid”—in the context of the narrative of the lunatic’s diseased brain. Again, a pure or lyrical language
Images such as the wriggling blot are not conventional symbols but require the viewer’s perception of and engagement in the process of producing meaning. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes the perspective of Lily, standing before her painting on the lawn, calling for Mrs. Ramsay and resolving her in a purplish triangle. Here, Woolf uses words to capture visually, emotionally, spatially, and kinetically the artist’s struggle to evoke through shapes rather than verbal language. Lily, “half out of the picture,” thinks of turning to Mr. Carmichael for help, but

one only woke people if one knew what one wanted to say to them. And she wanted to say not one thing, but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. “About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay”—no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. (178)

Nonetheless, the intensity of thinking of Mrs. Ramsay in that moment suddenly resolves the spaces and objects of the lawn before Lily into a visible evocation of the absent woman: “the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness” (179). Able to achieve this vision on her canvas, Lily again desires to connect with the poet Mr. Carmichael, to whom she attributes an equal power of vision, to ask “What does it mean?”: “A curious notion came to her that he did after all hear the things she could not say” (179).

Although Woolf’s work pursues an abstract or “pure” art (Lily’s canvas, “Time Passes”) only within the larger humanist frame of her narrative (*To the Lighthouse*), the

functions dialectically with narrative. Woolf’s first fully modernist novel, *Jacob’s Room*, opens with a demonstration of how the image can visually convey a mental state: the ink of Betty Flanders’s pen becomes a “horrid blot,” expressing her emotional state and the transformed landscape of the bay (“the lighthouse wobbled”) as her eyes fill with tears.
dialectic of theorizing such an art from within that frame proved a productive tension for pushing the bounds of fiction. Likewise, Dulac believed that theorizing a “pure” cinema as one possible but important avant-garde cinema benefited the cinema collectively.

Dulac wrote of the process of creation in her ideal integral cinema, “the very essence of cinema”: “I’m conjuring up a dancer! A woman? No. A line leaping about to harmonious rhythms. I’m conjuring up on the mist a luminous projection. Precise matter? No,” (“Du Sentiment” 129); rather, Dulac aspires to Woolf’s conception of cinema’s capacity. Dulac continues: “Fluid rhythms […] Harmony of lines. Harmony of light. Lines, surfaces, volumes, evolving directly without contrivance, in the logic of their forms, stripped of representational meaning, the better to aspire to abstraction and give more space to feelings and dreams: INTEGRAL CINEMA” (129). This kind of cinema, which Dulac did produce after The Seashell and the Clergyman in films such as Arabesques, is synonymous with the non-referential cinema Woolf glimpses in an accident at the screening of an expressionist film. Given Woolf’s desire for her works to be able to reproduce rather than point to experience, the “innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression” and which are within cinema’s grasp must have appeared extremely attractive, and writing of a pure cinema provided a means for expressing her own experimental work in fiction (E 4: 350).

“The Cinema” also records the writer’s imagination baulking at the question of cinema’s scope. Woolf must walk a careful line between preserving her own art as an exalted medium while also arguing for the field of this sister art to be opened to lyric narrative. Woolf asks, “For what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words?” (E 4: 351). In a variant of the
essay, Woolf prefaces this question with, “Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye?” (E 4: 594). Thought “has speed and slowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution” (E 4: 361). Moreover, in moments of emotion, it also has what Woolf calls “the picture-making power” in the essay’s variant: “the need to lift the burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The likeness of the thought is, for some reason, more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available than the thought itself” (E 4: 594).

Woolf then turns to thought’s poetic expression in literature, in Shakespeare, where “the most complex ideas, the most intense emotions form chains of images, through which we pass, however rapidly and completely they change, as up the loops and spirals of a twisting stair” (E 4: 351).

The cinema—particularly Dulac’s cinema of the “musical ungraspable”—would seem to surpass even Shakespeare in this poetic transformation in removing the scaffolding of words. However, Woolf takes a different tack, arguing for the equal facility of poetic language to create a thought “more available than the thought itself,” so that poetic language is the precursor to the cinematic image (E 4: 594). The “poet’s images are not to be cast in bronze or traced with pencil and paint,” since they are “compact of a thousand suggestions, of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost” (E 4: 351). Quoting Robert Burns’s “A Red, Red Rose,” Woolf argues that in poetry the “simplest image” presents a panoply of senses—touch, scent, heat, light,

---

4 In the Arts version, which I have been quoting, Woolf writes, “But it [thought] has also an inveterate tendency especially in moments of emotion to make images run side by side with itself, to create a likeness of the thing thought about, as if by so doing it took away its sting, or made it beautiful and comprehensible” (351).

310
that are “inextricably mixed and strung upon the lilt of a rhythm which suggests the emotional tenderness of love” (E 4: 351). As Dulac’s more abstract films reveal, this is precisely the methodology of a lyric cinema which can likewise evoke a panoply of senses, composed according to a visual rhythm, as adroitly as a poem. Curiously, Woolf swiftly concludes that “[a]ll this” is “accessible to words and to words alone” and is what “the cinema must avoid” (E 4: 351). Indeed, Woolf’s own description of the eye and brain looking together and of the tadpole blot on the screen suggests that cinema is better able to give audiences immediate access to such complex emotion and thought since the two are so “connected with seeing” (E 4: 351).

Hankins describes how the “The Cinema” reveals Woolf’s need to deny film theory’s challenges to the verbal art of writing and a concurrent need to explore and adopt, as she did with painting and art theory, “the strengths of film, grafting those new techniques and inspirations onto her writing” (“Across the Screen” 179). Woolf’s ambivalence lies between her declaration of what “the cinema must avoid,” a shoring up of the bastion of literary art, and a shrewd endorsement of the future possibilities of the art. Nonetheless, given Woolf’s ability to “graft” the other arts such as music and painting onto her own, it is not surprising that her vision of cinema’s lyric potential is so fulsome despite territorial trepidations. Woolf recognizes that the cinema has within its grasp “some residue of visual emotion not seized by artist or painter-poet” (E 4: 351). Woolf foresees in cinema, “Something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art, something which calls for the very slightest help from words or music to make itself intelligible, yet justly uses them subserviently” (E 4: 594). In creating a cinema with its own language, Woolf welcomes the filmmaker who would add “emotion,
and thought” to the “reality” at hand and so give us—“pebbles on the beach, the very quivers of the lips […] Anna […] in the flesh” (E 4: 351). Envisioning such a combination of eye and brain, Woolf imagines in the future what might be described as a mediated surrealist cinema: “see[ing] wild and lovely and grotesque thoughts pouring from men in dress suits and women with shingled heads. We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other. We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision” (352).  

5.2 The Seashell and the Clergyman: “the ineluctable theme of the spiral”

In “Sorcery and the Cinema,” Antonin Artaud also saw the potential of cinema in the “collision” of images; the cinema’s “direct and rapid language, has no need for a slow and ponderous logic” and will come closer to “fantasy,” which “we come to see more and more as really the only reality” (50). He writes that The Seashell and the Clergyman is his attempt to make this hidden reality as plausible as the reality taken for granted (50). Like Woolf, Artaud argues for an art that combines eye and brain, the material and imaginary: “There will not be one art of film which represents life and another which represents the process of thought,” because “what we call life, becomes more and more inseparable from the mind” and, for Artaud, is better translated by cinema than any other art (50).

---

5 This vision of thoughts of men and women mingling, affecting one another, of “collision,” is precisely the theory of “collision” or “clatter montage” that most attracted H.D. in film theory. Anne Friedberg discusses this theory and H.D.’s discussion of it in the Borderline “libretto” pamphlet (CU 219-20).
Artaud’s perspective is relevant as the author of the scenario for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*; nonetheless, Dulac can be rightly considered the film’s author, particularly given Artaud’s self-proclaimed distance from the final film. Infamously, a faction of the surrealist movement created a commotion at the film’s opening, an event that remains appropriately unresolved—the surrealists are said by different sources to have protested the film, protested Artaud, and protested Dulac for betraying Artaud’s intentions. Artaud is alleged to have become angered when his role in the film (he intended to play the clergyman) was eliminated during production. Richard Abel and Alain Virmaux, among others, have shown that Dulac’s and Artaud’s attitudes and aesthetic theories were not nearly as contradictory as some have argued or the opening’s uproar suggested. Abel explains, “the relations between the two were actually quite cordial during most of the production period, from June to September, 1927,” although Dulac did “carefully” distance Artaud from interfering in the film’s shooting and editing (475). More significantly, Artaud’s writing on cinema hardly suggests a rejection of Dulac’s work and indeed echoes her theories. In “Cinéma et l’abstraction,” he praised Dulac’s film for seeking to “penetrate the essence of cinema,” and wrote of the scenario: “It does not tell a story, it develops a series of mental states, which proceed one from the other like thought deduced from thought without reproducing a logical chain of events.

From the collision of objects and gestures real psychic situations deduce themselves

---

6 Like Flitterman-Lewis, I am less interested in the conflicts of double authorship that have weighted criticism of the film, as I am interested in the text as a product of Dulac’s evolving work. Artaud’s influence on the film’s production became increasingly negligible after he wrote the scenario. See Flitterman-Lewis’s Ph.D. dissertation, “Women, Representation, Cinematic Discourse: The Example of the French Cinema,” University at Berkeley, 1982, as well as Naomi Greene’s “Artaud and Film: A Reconsideration” for the conflict between Dulac and Artaud over its production.
between which the cornered intellect seeks a subtle escape” (qtd. in Sitney xviii).

Artaud’s “Sorcery and the Cinema” (1927), like Woolf’s “The Cinema,” sees the vision of pure cinema as coming at a decisive “turning-point” in the arts in general; a going over to the image to pursue the psychological rather than “a going over to prose” (Genette 219).  

In “The Cinema,” Woolf acknowledges the unique visual power of montage. It is the speed of “the most fantastic contrasts” flashing before the viewer that becomes a tool unique to the picture-maker, “a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain” (E 4: 352). “No fantasy could be too far-fetched or insubstantial,” Woolf writes, as if preparing her readers for her later novels rather than the future of cinema:

The past could be unrolled, distances annihilated, and the gulfs which dislocate novels (when, for instance, Tolstoy has to pass from Levin to Anna, and in doing so jars his story and wrenches and arrests our sympathies) could, by the sameness of the background, by the repetition of some scene, be smoothed away. (595)

Woolf uses the same language in her diaries as she theorizes and works through the “problem” of form in her current novel. In The Waves, the distance between each characters’ individual subjectivity is “smoothed away” as interior monologues borrow phrases from other characters’ interior monologues, and the “repetition of some scene” through six centers of consciousness creates a symphony of six parts on a common theme. Woolf achieves a sameness of background in her use of italicized interludes, which describe an unpopulated seashore, a house, the play of light, and birds, and is a device repeated throughout to mark out movements in the larger piece. The interludes

---

7 Artaud writes, “The cinema has arrived at a turning-point in human thought at the very moment when language loses its power to make symbols and the mind tires of the play of representations” (50).
The Seashell and the Clergyman practices a similar spiraling progression around three central characters, whose identities sometimes intermingle. Although Dulac’s film is typically viewed as the epitome of anti-narrative surrealism, as Abel has argued, The Seashell and the Clergyman “works to create a different kind of continuity through discontinuity,” as it utilizes the continuity editing of conventional film discourse in order to expose its illusionism (Abel 477). The film’s “deconstruction” extends to social constructions of desire in the repeated staging of a surreal scene of frustrated desire. Authorial reliability is also brought into crisis through the film’s blurring of the differences between an omniscient and subjective narration (Abel 477). While the film tells the clergyman’s story, his subjectivity is less the focus of the film than are the apparatuses of subjectivity and the cinema itself; as in the more lyric of lyric narratives, the “plot” is subordinate to self-reflexive and ontological exploration. Although a complete version of The Seashell and the Clergyman was found by Henri Langlois in 1962, prints widely available in the U.S. continue to circulate which have the second and third reels of the film reversed (Abel 593). Given that such a mishandling of the film’s progression could be perpetuated—indeed, I didn’t realize the mistake during my first viewing of the film—describing the film’s plot is less appropriate than summarizing chronologically various arrangements; such a summary follows:
The film opens with the clergyman, actor Alex Allin, dressed in a dark tight suit, filling beakers with a clear liquid poured from a large flat shell. In a kind of underground “alchemist’s laboratory” (Abel 476), he lets the beakers shatter on the floor atop a growing pile of debris. A military general, actor Lucien Bataille, dressed in a uniform heavily encrusted with medals, enters, parades his saber, and uses it to punitively shatter the seashell. The clergyman then follows the general through twisting city streets on his hands and knees. As he pursues the general’s carriage, the viewer sees a reaction shot of the clergyman suddenly pitch upwards with a horrified expression. A reverse shot of the carriage shows the general sitting with a beautiful woman; this reverse shot is an impossible correspondence since the clergyman is behind the carriage. Notably, while the events of the film thus far have defied conventional reason, it is this break in rhetorical filmic discourse (the conventions of the shot, reverse shot) and its effect of drawing attention to that break that is particularly unsettling.

The clergyman enters a city church, pursuing the beautiful and smiling woman, actress Gêrica Athanasiou, who is in eighteenth-century courting dress. When the clergyman attacks and strangles the general, who sits opposite the woman in a confessional, the general’s garb becomes a priest’s. Dulac uses soft irises to frame the woman, whose reverse shot of the priest shows his amiable expression; Dulac then uses distorted lenses and manipulates the film so that the priest’s face appears to crack in the clergyman’s reverse shot of him. The clergyman throws the priest from a cliff to take his place. Returning to the woman, he expresses his rage with pounding fists while the woman stands watching him in a blank, radiant loveliness. Lunging violently forward,
the clergyman rips off her bodice. In a medium close up of her torso, her exposed breasts are hidden by a carapace made of shells that slowly materializes, which he then seizes.

A scene of a wild ball follows. The general and woman arrive in royal garb and are followed by the clergyman who flourishes and swings the carapace, a gesture intercut with shots of the chandelier swinging. Witnessing the woman dissolve into the air and reappear in another corner in a flowing white robe, the clergyman drops the carapace in terror and clutches his crotch. The dropped carapace bursts into flames and disappears, while the clergyman’s coattails grow across the floor. In the next shot, the clergyman chases the woman down a country road. The chase is intercut with close ups of the woman’s face which alters in a series of facial distortions (emphasized by lens manipulation) against a black background. The two then run through a series of hallways with closing doors. Alone, the clergyman enters a room with a large globe placed on a pedestal in the center. Having beckoned to the unseen woman, he captures her head inside the globe. The clergyman is then seen trying a key on a number of doors, buoyant and rakish, tapping the key on his palm. Seeing the couple again (they are dressed again in formal royal garb), the clergyman chases both of them through the previous hallways and along the country road.

An overhead shot of a circle of pounding fists seems to rouse the clergyman, who appears to have been asleep in a hammock on a ship. The general and woman are found kissing (the woman’s body seems suspended in the air above the ship), which prompts the clergyman standing alone against a mast to mime strangling her. In a shot of his hands grasping, her fantasized neck (superimposed) is replaced by a series of images of islands of stalactites, glittering surfaces, water, and a small sailing ship, which appear
between his opened hands. The scene is replaced by a troop of maids who dust and scour
the dark glass globe and room, under the direction of a tightly buttoned governess, the
woman. In a brief scene shot from a high angle, the viewer glimpses a man obscured by
tree limbs and a woman walking towards him in tennis costume. The cleaning maids are
again shown as a group of butlers arrive, and again the shot of the tennis pair, and finally
the clergyman and the woman arrive as a wedding couple in the room with the globe and
servants.

An extreme close up of the clergyman’s head facilitates the appearance of four
dream-images (echoing those that appeared between his hands) that appear as separate
boxes across his face. A headless clergyman is then abruptly seen descending a flight of
stairs, holding the dark globe. When he arrives in the room, a sharp pan of the lined-up
servants’ eyes ends in the clergyman dropping the globe. It shatters on the floor, his face
appearing among the shards. The clergyman, nonetheless, is shown in an overhead shot,
standing with the seashell in hand; he drinks from the shell, which bears the image of his
head. The film closes as the viewer witnesses the clergyman drink the dark liquid and his
floating face from the seashell.8

Abel writes that the technical effects that recur throughout the film’s discourse
leads to a dispersal of “the subjective into its opposite and vice versa, producing a world
that is both other and the same,” thus making the film’s concluding double image apt, “as
the clergyman’s own face is both the subject and object of his seeing” (478). Moreover,
it is this matrix of vision which the audience, looking from the cave-like setting of a

8 See also Flitterman-Lewis’ excellent summary (118-19).
theatre into the cave-like setting of this final scene, registers as self-reflexive. In contrast to Dulac’s previous work, conventional identification is denied. In The Seashell and the Clergyman, “the very concept of the subjective is called into question and the narrative subject put into crisis” (Abel 477). As in Woolf’s The Waves, the viewer or reader has occasion to see with the perspective of a prism of identities (clergyman, general, female figure; Neville, Louis, Bernard, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda) as well as with the implied author, thus interrogating the mutability, fragileness, and unreliability of those identities or narrators. As Abel has shown, Dulac continually dissolves “the usual differences between the omniscient and the subjective” (477).

Furthermore, both texts require the audience’s involvement in reconstructing the narrative through their own subjective lens; the audience’s role must be creative, and the brain is not allowed to drift in an “agreeable somnolence” (E 4: 349). Like The Waves, Dulac’s The Seashell and the Clergyman opens with a disorienting sequence, introducing the three main figures and several of the images that will circulate throughout the film. The scenes follow no conventional or linear narrative, but seem associational or oneiric; the recurring figures and images and evocation of a narrative provide a bass line. These images recur rhythmically, and meaning accrues with each recurrence; thus the spiraling progression of characters and objects simultaneously suggest an authorial consciousness and implicates the viewer in actively participating by following and constructing the meaning of the images according to his or her own subjectivity in a dialectic with the implied author.

In 1926, Woolf’s vision of the cinema of the future—“the dream architecture of arches and battlements, of cascades falling and fountains rising, which sometimes visits
us in sleep or shapes itself in half-darkened rooms, could be realized before our waking eyes” (*E* 4: 595)—was being realized by Dulac in France. Audiences of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* found themselves enveloped in the “dream architecture” of the clergyman, the eye having to call on the brain for help in creating a bridge of meaning between what the eye sees (including arches, cascades, fountains, shapes emerging in a half-darkened room) and what the brain has been led to expect from narrative cinema. Dulac used no intertitles during the film; in the first four sequences, she uses a conventional system of fades to punctuate each sequence, but then abandons (in order to play on) that convention in the rest of the film. The point of view system and eye-line matches, which establish a conventional diegetic flow of shots and identifies subjective shots, is rarely used or used erratically. If “[r]epresentational space” is put into crisis, then time is as well, as night seems to fall randomly and suddenly, particular flows of images are “marked by an excess of repetition that borders on the obsessive,” and subjective fantasy sequences become indistinguishable from objectively shot scenes of obsessive desire (*Abel* 477).

This rigorous departure from conventional filmic discourse and literary referentiality was a key step for Dulac in breaking cinema’s shackles. The surrealist movement provided Dulac with a practicable context for making that break. In “The Cinema,” Woolf acknowledges the obstacles faced by the filmmaker who would discover film’s own aesthetic language and who would connect the poetic image with “what we are pleased to call reality” (*E* 4: 352). The filmmaker must above all convince audiences of the importance of achieving such an aesthetic: “He [sic] must make us believe that our loves and hates lie that way too. How slow a process this is bound to be, and attended with what pain and ridicule and indifference can easily be foretold when we remember
how painful novelty is” (*E* 4: 352). Woolf and Dulac echo, although in a more tempered tone, the surrealists’ belief that beauty—as we encounter it in modernity—must be convulsive (Breton, *Nadja* 160). Borrowing some of the electric current of the surrealists’ shocks facilitated their attempts to hasten the slow process of expanding the range of their art and, concomitantly, of their audience.

At pains herself to explain the role of the avant-garde to audiences, Dulac understood this first-hand. The avant-garde had explored and realized “pure thought and technique” and come to apply these “to more clearly human films,” thus establishing not only cinema’s dramatic foundations but also the technical, expressive potential of the movie camera (48). The avant-garde had ultimately “so to speak, sharpened the eye of the public” and fertilized the mind by breaking “new ground in enlarging cinematic thought in its totality,” bearing “the seeds of the conceptions of future generations” (48).

Both Woolf and Dulac used their criticism to fertilize the ground, to explain the new kind of relationship between text and audience they sought to create through their lyric narrative art. For both it meant putting the eye at risk: the “English unaesthetic eye” is exposed to shocks (*E* 4: 348), the “bad optic” becomes an “eye” sharpened, and the eye is “touched” (Dulac 37). As a result, the brain is put on its mettle in having to reinterpret what the eye receives. However, unlike the kinds of encounter many of the surrealists’ texts engendered, the eye and brain are also subtly guided (and perhaps soothed and seduced into taking up the performance) by the implied author’s presence as a suggestive composer.

Both Dulac and Woolf also turn to another art, music, for analogies of the form and desired effect of their experimental work. Abel writes of the prominence of “the
musical analogy” in early French film theory, appearing prominently in the writing of Dulac, Abel Gance, and Jean Epstein, but suggests “another formulation probably would be more precise—‘poetic composition’” for narrative avant-garde films, since “the process was similar to that of rhetorical and rhythmic patterning in poetry, a kind of poeticization of that process of representation” (249). Both analogies—music and poetry—suggest the alternate mode of reception that such films aspired to create. While poetic composition may be a more apt analogy in many instances, Woolf and Dulac seem to have preferred music, particularly when attempting to unsnarl cinema as an art of its own from literary and dramatic referentiality. In part, this preference may be due to music’s relationship of text, composer, audience, and performance. According to Dulac, if cinema’s goal is to visually reproduce movement over time, then the preexisting arts that shared that goal were modernist literature and music. Lacking a “creative spirit,” filmmakers had used the instrument of cinema as “a new means of expression for novelistic or dramatic literature […] it was put in the service of the ‘story to tell’,” as “for music, no one even thought about it” as a model (“The Visual Idea” 38). Woolf concludes “The Cinema” by characterizing the art as “born the wrong end first” and returns to the musical analogy she opens the piece with:

It is as if a savage tribe instead of finding two bars of iron to play with had found scattering the seashore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy but without knowing a note of music to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time. (E 4: 352-3)

Woolf uses the same language in *The Waves* when the writer Bernard expresses his awe and frustration over the attempt to write his life and the lives of his companions. In the novel’s last movement, Bernard uses his familiar metaphor of “[t]he crystal, the
globe of life as one calls it” (also prominent Dulac’s film) to describe the necessary but illusory effort of constructing a coherent narrative of one’s life: “far from being hard and cold to the touch, [the globe] has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst” (256). Bernard wonderingly describes the collapse of the boundaries of subjectivity in his attempt to produce an aesthetic form for their six lives (and, inherently, the movement of Woolf’s text itself):

How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum, or whatever the instrument might be. (256)

In a March 16, 1926 letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf discusses the relation of rhythm to language, revealing a belief in the superior power of the image:

Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and see this working (which has nothing to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it. (L 3: 247-48)

Woolf again posits the necessary balance of “eye” and “brain” in creating a work of art. The “sight, an emotion” is the powerful shock the exposed eye receives, requiring the brain’s smithy work of making “words to fit it,” and the artist’s important task is not the triumph of language in mastering the shock but is to enable us to “see this working.”

Dulac, invested in exploring the “visual idea” of the new art (“The Visual Idea” 40), theorizes a similar rhythm, but a cinematic rhythm that rejects the logical processes of language, attempting not unlike Woolf to go “far deeper than words.” From the standpoint of the new methods of an integral cinema, Dulac states what Woolf more reticently implies, “neither literature nor theatre, which dilute impressions and
inspirations have influenced [integral] cinema, but on the contrary they have been
influenced by it” (40). Dulac’s rhetoric here takes an opposite but complementary tack
from her usual argument in attempting to free cinema from the shackles of literature and
theatre, by challenging these arts from the perspective of the potentials of a “pure
cinema” of “harmonies, chords, of shadow, of light, of rhythm, of movement, of facial
expressions” (“Anti-Visual” 33). Dulac argues that the director must not “draw his
inspiration from a novel or a play,” but from music: “Only music can inspire this feeling
which cinema also aspires to” (“The Visual Idea” 40-1).

In turning to music, Dulac shares Woolf’s three-part conception (eye, brain, self-
reflexive revelation) of a lyric narrative aesthetic. She describes cinema’s technical
ability of “caressing the eye” and the cinematographer’s intervention as creating
“meaning” (“Anti-Visual” 32). The cinema also offers a deconstructive perspective,
showing the heretofore unconscious processes of movement as well as drawing attention
to the cinematic apparatus itself in the director’s artistic framing of the image. The eye
judges “synthetically” the effort of a leaping horse (slow motion) or grain of sprouting
wheat (fast motion): “Cinema, by decomposing movement, makes us see, analytically,
the beauty of the leap in a series of minor rhythms which accomplish the major rhythm”
(“Anti-Visual” 32). Film reveals not only the “synthesis of the movement of growth,”
but also causes the viewer to witness and perhaps experience the “psychology of this
movement” (“Anti-Visual” 32).

In The Seashell and the Clergyman, the rhythm of the circulation of images
underscores the impossibility of a symbol having a fixed meaning, or it at least implies a
kind of signification that exceeds the borders of conventional reason. The seashell at the
beginning of the film fulfills a seemingly meaningless purpose for the clergyman: he uses it to fill beakers which are immediately dropped and shattered on a growing pile. The shell next reappears in the film, doubled, as a carapace covering the woman’s breasts, either in a frustration of desire or as a means to shore up desire. When the clergyman drops the carapace in reaction to the woman’s disappearance and reappearance, it is consumed in flames. Finally, the seashell appears in its original function of holding liquid (now dark), but it now also bears the image of the clergyman’s head (which has transferred from a shattered globe that itself has previously been used to capture the woman’s head). Dulac’s use of the seashell as image visualizes the psychoanalytic process—whether the dynamics of desire or the interpretation of a dream or wish image—while calling on audiences to also observe and interrogate that process. The shell fills and fills with meaning, but also deflects a fixed meaning; its circulation, destruction, and recurrence foregrounds Dulac’s refusal of a closed visual language.

In The Waves, Woolf further interrogates the relationship of the image and language for the author. Bernard sits “in the Italian room at the National Gallery picking up fragments”; he reflects on the pictures’ merciful non-referentiality (“they do not nudge; they do not point”). They rest “the mind’s eye” so that “I may find something unvisual beneath” (156). Bernard regrets his own inability to express in “phrases” emotions such as those that the “unvisual” pictures present, un-writeable emotions that he expresses in a montage: “A child playing—a summer evening—door will open and shut, will keep opening and shutting, through which I see sights that make me weep. For they cannot be imparted. Hence our loneliness; hence our desolation” (156-7). Through Bernard, Woolf comments on the shackles of language. He characterizes visual artists as
steeped in a sublime silence, since they “are not like poets—scapegoats; they are not chained to the rock” (157). Nonetheless, Woolf again asserts the composing power of language as a necessary complement to the visual shock. Bernard becomes oppressed by “the perpetual solicitation of the eye. […] Arrows of sensation strike from my spine, but without order,” whereas his “interpretation” adds that something that “lies deeply buried” (157). Here, midway through The Waves, Bernard allows that something to nonetheless remain buried, where it can “breed” in his mind and one day “fructify,” perhaps at the end of a lifetime “in a moment of revelation,” since now it only “breaks in my hand. Ideas break a thousand times for once that they globe themselves entire. […] ‘Line and colours they survive, therefore…’” (157-58). Dulac, a visual artist striving for a sublime visual “music of silence” (“Anti-Visual” 33), echoes Bernard’s disingenuous distinction between the sublime painter and tormented poet, finding her resolution in cinema’s capacity for rhythmic movement, for the spiral progression of an image. In The Seashell and the Clergyman, Dulac presents a series of visual ideas, such as a globe, precisely in order to foreground that breaking down or apart of whole or immutable ideas, drawing viewers into the mutability of interpretation.

Teresa Heffernan usefully outlines the canonical modernist aesthetic as “both liberating and disquieting” for the artist, as it advocates “radical experimentation, a demystification of the traditions of the past, the dissolution of borders, and an interest in alternate perspectives” while also being concerned with “legitimizing this new aesthetic” (20). Thus, by championing her musical analogy of a cinematic symphony, Woolf

---

9 In fashioning Bernard’s loveable but sweeping ego, Woolf also offers a self-critique of over-romanticizing the struggle of the poet, “chained to the rock.”
negotiates the legitimacy of her own art in the face of the new art of film by cultivating a wider audience for the avant-garde while simultaneously revealing the special province of the literary avant-garde. The impulse of modern aesthetics for novelty and flux, abetted by new technologies, simultaneously evinced a nostalgic concern for unity and artistic authority; this experience of duality is attested to in Woolf’s and Dulac’s writing, and was compounded by their identities as female artists. As feminists, they championed the dissolution of the hierarchy “high art/mass culture,” a binary “always inscribed as a masculine/feminine discourse” (Heffernan 21). Nonetheless, their position at the margins of artistic culture (as women) also would have made abdicating a hard won authority, or at least a place to speak from, a difficult choice. Their status as authors, after all, enabled them to bring audiences to scrutinize such binaries as high art/mass culture, masculine/feminine, author/consumer.

It is perhaps most helpful to understand the modernist novel and avant-garde film not as competing with each other in this period, as Woolf disingenuously suggests in “The Cinema” and Dulac in her crusade against the “literary” film, but as pursuing in a parallel manner the invention of a new form, modernist lyric narrative. While both argued strenuously against the conventions of literary narrative, their discontent would hardly been have directed at one another. Dulac’s rapturous vision of a future pure cinema might seem a slight to all writers: “An art made of truth and nuances, radiating the imponderable! An art which does not have its limits set by a lump of clay, a piece of canvas, lines which come to an end, words which trap life, the tight channel of a sentence stifling feeling” (“The Visual Idea” 41). However, Woolf’s vision of a future cinema in her essay, and more importantly, her vision of a new kind of novel (requiring a new kind
of sentence), precisely coincides with Dulac’s unbounded, open, symphonic text. Indeed, Dulac’s account of her desired “integral film,” a “visual symphony,” might describe Woolf’s _The Waves_ or “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”: “There is no story there except that of a soul which feels and thinks, and nevertheless our feelings are reached. The heart of the composer sings in the notes, which, perceived in turn by the audience, cause the motion to be born in them” (41). Both Woolf and Dulac seek to liberate their arts by turning to musical and poetic composition and its unique relationship with its audience. Although neither relinquishes their status as authors, they undermine conventional notions of authority by insisting on the audience’s performative role in creating the text. By shifting audience expectations of the text, the lyric narrative was to become a site of mutual exploration and questioning.

In developing lyric narrative in literature and in film, Woolf and Dulac turn to the analogy of music for a textual model, for a model of the kind of relationship the text creates with the audience, and as a model of the kind of content it would seek—emotional, psychological, immediate experience. The repetition of the call for cinema to unfold “like music” attests to the broadly shared interests in psychoanalysis shared by the avant-garde in the earlier twenties. Like music, cinema had the potential to express and provoke emotions, moods, and meditations without representational mediation, to discover “new emotional chords” (“Avant-Garde” 43). Introducing a showing of _The Smiling Madame Beudet_ on June 17, 1924 at the Museé Galliera, Dulac used a metaphor strikingly like the “keyboard of consciousness” discussed previously regarding Woolf’s and H.D.’s fugue writing:
The shot is at once space, action, thought. Each different image juxtaposed to another is named: shot. The shot is a fragment of drama; it is a nuance which converges on the conclusion. It is the keyboard on which we play. It is the single means that we have to create, in a progression, an inkling of a character’s inner life. (qtd. in Abel 340)

Although as interested in the psychological as the surrealists, Dulac’s emphasis on composition marks her difference from the enforced randomness of the surrealists. For Dulac, the creation of “new emotional chords” or the exploration of “psychic processes” is only possible through a conscious, aesthetic arrangement of shots, of light, movement, and rhythm. Thus Dulac’s film, a “symphonic poem, where emotion bursts forth not in fact, not in actions, but in visual sonorities,” is more closely allied with lyric narrative than the surrealists (“Avant-garde” 46). After The Seashell and the Clergyman, Dulac’s short films of 1928 and 1929 place an even greater emphasis on the lyric mode. Flitterman-Lewis describes these films’ “melodic arrangement of luminous reflections” and “rhythmic ordering of successive shots” as analogous in their effect on audiences to “a musical fugue” (70). However, this emphasis on poetic composition and de-emphasis on “the referential content of the filmic shot” does not mean an esoteric formalism; rather, its “intersection of unconscious processes of desire with the harmony of forms on the screen” have “implications for feminism” (Flitterman-Lewis 70).

5.3 The Seashell and The Waves: “unconscious optics”

The maieutic painfulness of novelty that Woolf describes is certainly witnessed in the critical response to Dulac’s film, a response exacerbated by Dulac’s outsider status—as a woman directing film, and, moreover, as a woman directing a surrealist film while
herself not a member of the surrealist group. David Curtis, for example, praises Artaud’s scenario while faulting Dulac’s execution:

The images have no narrative meaning, they are rather a series of visual stimuli intended to create a psychological drama within the viewer, rousing the mind by osmosis without verbal transposition. Dulac’s cinematic transposition is not always helpful. Her sense of pictorial design and too-well-measured editing (visual rhythm) detract from the essential realism of Artaud’s vision. (20)

Curtis faults Dulac for her authorial presence—her “sense of pictorial design” and “visual rhythm”—which sets up a critical distance between the “essential realism” of the surrealist dream and the audience’s reception of it because of the sense of that realism as composed. I agree that the film does not successfully transpose the verbal drama of Artaud’s scenario (Curtis’s source of contention); however, I would argue that this is because Dulac achieves rather the ideal of Artaud’s vision, a visual transposition mediated by a “visual idea” and without the mediation of a verbal language. Dulac’s film certainly creates “a psychological drama within the viewer,” a drama in which the author/audience’s distance between Artaud’s surrealist vision and the audience’s experience of it is essential.

Indeed, at its first screening for the Ciné-Club de France on October 25, 1927, Dulac presented the film as “A Dream of Antonin Artaud, Visual Composition by Germaine Dulac.” Artaud then published a draft of his scenario in the Nouvelle Revue Française that objected to “an exclusively oneiric interpretation,” protesting Dulac’s designation of the film as his dream (Bawden 670; Abel 475). According to The Oxford Companion to Film, which must refer to the film’s exhibition on February 9, 1928, “the affronted Surrealists [led by André Breton] stormed out of the cinema, leaving the lay audience, who were totally baffled by the film, in a state of uproar” (670). Citing
Artaud’s publishers, Georges Sadoul writes of the surrealist walkout as their sentencing, “one in which Mme. Dulac was found guilty of having ‘deformed and betrayed’ a surrealist script” (Heck-Rabi 45). Nonetheless, the film would come to be hailed as the first surrealist film, and by the very surrealists who first objected to its exhibition. Marjorie Rosen notes, “both Antonin Artaud, père to the Theatre of the Absurd, and the prestigious Cinémathè Française credited Dulac as the mother of surrealism” (378).

Wendy Dozoretz’s research on the film’s reception concludes, “The Seashell and the Clergyman must now be considered not simply as a mockery of Artaud’s work,” Sadoul’s initial story, “but as the unique product of two incongruous minds,” Sadoul’s later reconsideration (46).

As Heck-Rabi has suggested, this unique product was born of the conflict between Artaud’s misogyny and ego encountering Dulac’s feminism and lyric narrative aesthetic. Dozoretz, who studied Artaud’s letters to Dulac, discusses her choice of another actor for the clergyman:

Artaud’s obsessive identification with the protagonist must be understood as the crucial issue in his denunciation of the film. Whereas Artaud saw the powerful male ego sufficient unto itself, Dulac exposed and criticized this conception by ridiculing the dominant representation of man. (52)

Had the film not included the critical distance that such an authorial presence enables, and that David Curtis faults, then this feminist critique and humor would have been plight.

---

10 Does Sadoul make this claim with surrealist irony? Wendy Dozoretz provides the clearest evaluation of the Dulac and Artaud debacle and Sadoul’s role in the walkout: Sadoul, with Robert Desnos and Louis Aragon, launched a typical surrealist demonstration at the film’s opening. When the credits began, Breton is said to have yelled “Madame Dulac in a cow”; the other three followed in yelling profanities at Dulac and throwing objects at the screen to prevent its projection. According to Dozoretz, Sadoul thought he was protesting Artaud’s work rather than Dulac’s; thirty-four years later, in 1962, he reappraised the film as a surrealist classic—as Artaud himself already had.
impossible. Abel likewise argues that Dulac’s substitution of the “awkward comic pathos” of the actor Alex Allin for Artaud’s “virile, intense, even erotic presence” crucially enabled the film’s “feminist critique of a fetishizing male vision” (479). Not coincidentally, Artaud’s discontent is said to have been for Dulac having “feminized” his script (Smith, *Movies* 12). Considering her standpoint of a woman in France (and thus a non-citizen), Dulac’s choice of exposing the hypocrisies of clericalism, her satiric portrayal of militarism, and her defamiliarization of the image of femininity, shows a boldness that cannot be underestimated.\(^{11}\) Nonetheless, Rosen’s description of the film as “a boldly surrealistic anticlerical diatribe” (378) is perhaps inaccurate, as a “diatribe” suggests a closed condemnation whereas the film itself is scrupulously open-ended in its deconstructive critique.

The consequence is a text that calls upon the viewer for interpretation, thus engaging the viewer in a politicized art. More recent critics’ readings of the film’s “feminist critique” support the film’s openness. Abel sees the film’s deconstruction of the sexual subject as Dulac’s play upon the Oedipal narrative—the clergyman (son), general (father), and woman (mother) (Abel 478). However, rather than conclude with the “expected resolution—a death, a union, an escape,” Dulac ends with “the ‘son’ left face to face with his own desire, and perhaps his own violently ambiguous narcissism” (478). Flitterman-Lewis also turns to psychoanalytic theory to describe the film’s

\(^{11}\) For an assessment of the socio-political climate of France during Dulac’s career, see Siân Reynolds’s *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*. “French women were barred from any formal share in parliamentary or even local politics, since they could neither vote nor stand for election before 1944” (Reynolds 2). As a female “auteur,” Dulac was the exception during an “age of change” in which “an all-male intelligentsia” prevailed (Reynolds 97).
feminist critique but focuses on the “spectator’s actual participation, as the subject of the fantasm, in the experience of those psychic processes themselves” (112). Via surrealism, Dulac bypasses the usual construct of plot and character, calling on the viewer to identify “with the film-text itself” and engage in “the actual production process of desire” (Flitterman-Lewis 117). In this reading, Dulac’s film is a feminist critique of the continual construction of desire/femininity; the female figure “provides a sustained reflection on the construction and production of femininity” (Flitterman-Lewis 121).

A necessary supplement to Flitterman-Lewis’s reading is a recognition of the film’s exposure of the production of masculinity as well; the violence of the general/priest and his changes of costume are as marked as the woman’s repeated flights and her changing costumes. Although the woman is central to Dulac’s project, the fact of her undergoing “no fewer than ten transformations of attire” is not significant unless it is in the context of the general’s attire changing only once and the clergyman’s static, tightly-buttoned appearance (Flitterman-Lewis 124). We see how femininity, continuously refashioned, fashions a constructed masculine identity as the stable other. The costume choices—“billowing eighteenth-century gown and feathered bonnet to slender black silk dress with train, from a flowing Empire-style garment to the dark high-collared outfit of a governess, from the contemporary tennis outfit of pleated skirt and sweater to the filmy simplicity of a wedding gown” (Flitterman-Lewis 124)—suggest Walter Benjamin’s analysis of fashion and novelty in his *Arcades Project*. To focus on the woman-as-image to the exclusion of the representation of the film’s two male figures

12 Flitterman-Lewis also points to the film’s possible narratives of Oedipus and Narcissus.
misses the damning exposure of patriarchy’s performance of a continual cycle of
destruction and novelty that is projected onto the body of the female other.

The film’s surrealism engages the viewer in deconstructing linear narrative and
traditional meaning-making structures, but the text must also retain narrative threads in
order to perform such a deconstruction. Dulac’s feminist and modernist aesthetic thus
exposes how conventional (Hollywood) narratives perpetuate a patriarchal performance,
creating ruptures (a scandal, a death, an interrupted romance) in order to work toward
homogeneity and closure. Contrary to Flitterman-Lewis’s suggestion that “the film
consists of a series of moments connected associatively without any regard for narrative
logic or causality,” the flow of images does assemble with a particular regard for
narrative logic, albeit a subversive regard (118). As in Woolf’s The Waves, the
circulation of images in the text suggests a rigorous poetic composition. Nonetheless,
this is not a closed lyrical formalism in which the introduction, circulation, and return of
the image fulfils its purpose in generating a meaning that is stabilized and consumed in a
satisfactory closure. Rather, the poetic composition produces in the viewer a certain
desire for the potential satisfaction of an accomplished composition—here providing a
sense of coherence, humor, and visual pleasure in an otherwise disturbing text—while
simultaneously refusing that closure. Abel writes of the persistent ambiguity of Dulac’s
“pattern of rhetorical figuring that devolves from the seashell of its title” at the close of
the film: “The initial figure of seashell, liquid, and shattering glass has returned, but
reversed, transformed, and no less ambiguous […] its significance remains enigmatic
and multiple” (479-80).
If, as Artaud held, the film was to reproduce the mechanism of a dream, then the particularly subversive aspect of Dulac’s refusal of conventions of filmic identification (the film itself is no figural individual’s dream, the narration dissolves the omniscient and the subjective) is in requiring the film to be the dream of the audience by default. *The Seashell and the Clergyman* thereby fulfills the avant-garde’s aim of making a cinema that would not represent but rather would reproduce that which is unrepresentable—the poetic workings of the unconscious. Artaud called for a cinema that could achieve a directness of “purely visual situations whose dramatic action springs from a shock designed for the eyes, a shock founded […] on the very substance of the gaze” (qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 123). Artaud continues, “There is no hidden significance of a psychological, metaphysical, or even human[istic] kind” (126). Although overstated, this pronouncement is consonant with Dulac and Artaud’s aims of creating visual images that create a “shock” with a basis in the spectator’s gaze. In other words, the significance is not “hidden” by the author or auteur within the text to be decoded; rather, the significance lies within the spectator. The shock is the moment of seeing one’s own dreamwork before one’s eyes in waking life; the psychological, metaphysical, and even humanist significance of seeing that dreamwork lies in the matrix of meaning created by composer and active audience.

5.4 Benjamin’s “Surrealism”: Dulac’s “poetic politics”

In reading *The Seashell and the Clergyman* as a text produced at the crossroads of surrealism (Artaud’s vision) and feminism (Dulac’s), it is helpful to turn to Benjamin’s analysis of the crossroads that the surrealist movement had reached during this period.
Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism” was published in *Die Literarische Welt* in 1929, and it reveals the important affinities he found between the surrealist movement and his own thought. The previous year, Benjamin’s “One-Way Street” had already suggested the development of his theory of the dialectical image and the emergence of his methodology of “literary montage” for the *Arcades Project*. Indeed, in a letter referring to “Surrealism,” Benjamin calls the essay “an opaque folding screen in front of the Arcades study” (*Briefe* 2: 489). Richard Wolin has identified the attractions surrealism bore for Benjamin. First, the surrealists’ use of montage offered an alternative to traditional methods of philosophy, one more likely to produce sudden illuminations that were nonetheless rooted to material reality. Second, surrealists’ “immersion in the concrete particularity of everyday life” corresponded with Benjamin’s attention to detail, a “micrological-philosophical sense” (Wolin 100). Third, the boundaries between art and life are confounded in surrealist works, and Benjamin sides with the surrealists’ challenge to bourgeois art as a separate realm. Although writing as an outsider to the French movement, Benjamin identifies with their conflict, “the crisis of the intelligentsia, or, more precisely with that of the humanistic concept of freedom” (“Surrealism” 177).

Despite these important affinities, Benjamin does not identify himself as a surrealist, and neither did Dulac, despite being hailed as the mother of the surrealist film. Rather, in their surrealist texts, both Benjamin and Dulac position themselves at a critical but productive distance from the movement itself. Indeed, in “Surrealism,” Benjamin figures the movement’s “[i]ntellectual currents” as a resource that “the critic [can] install his power station on,” and figures himself, as a “German observer,” able to more accurately “gauge the energies of the movement” (177). Benjamin’s attraction to
the movement also lies in the reflection it offers for his own intellectual crises, “its highly exposed position between an anarchistic *fronde* and a revolutionary discipline” (177). Thus, Benjamin’s analysis of surrealism marks out the in-between space that his own work will attempt to create in the next decade. As Margaret Cohen has argued, “Benjamin makes use of surrealism, then, not only for its shocklike aesthetics but also because the movement provides a conceptual paradigm to explain why these shocklike aesthetics work to political effect” (197). As Benjamin’s image of himself as a “power station” suggests, he uses the surrealist movement to fuel the construction of his own conceptual paradigm of the political effect of the profane illumination.

He makes clear that “the heroic phase” of the surrealist movement’s incipient phase “is over,” that is, the circle of 1919 that included André Breton, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, and Paul Eluard who had been “pushing the ‘poetic life’ to the utmost limits of possibility” (178). Looking back to that time, when surrealism emerged as an “inspiring dream wave,” Benjamin identifies its promise of absolute integration: the boundaries between “waking and sleeping,” “image and sound,” “[i]mage and language” were dissolved in a flood of “images” (178-9). This dream vision “loosens” or returns one to an experience prior to “meaning” and to “the self.” Furthermore, Benjamin notes that this “living experience […] allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication,” thus able to both have and observe the dream vision (179). However, it is not this “heroic phase” that Benjamin examines in defining his key concept of “profane illumination.” Rather, as Cohen has noted, he turns away from the early experiments and takes up surrealist prose narratives, particularly Breton’s *Nadja*. The movement’s departure from traditional poetry into “poetic life” and the
surrealist vision, which he calls “a profane illumination,” is its “creative overcoming” of, on the one hand, the opiate of the “religious illumination” and, on the other, the “introductory lesson” to illumination through drugs (“Surrealism” 179). Profane illumination is, rather, “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (179) best suited to the surrealist prose narrative.

Although Theodor Adorno (particularly in his later works) championed aesthetic modernism in terms quite similar to Benjamin’s concept of the profane illumination, he staunchly rejected surrealist techniques. Adorno argues that the surrealist methodology of montage, specifically in making use of the material of bourgeois society without mediation, inevitably led to a reification of the commodified culture it should critique. Surrealist images are “commodity fetishes” and create a paralysis in the moment of awakening (Notes 89). In his essay, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” Adorno (focusing primarily on surrealist painting and visual art) critiques the surrealist use of psychoanalysis. As Wolin points out, Adorno argues that rather than emphasizing the important latent content, the interpretation of the dream, the surrealists fetishized the dream’s manifest content (108). My point in turning to Adorno’s important critique is to argue that both Dulac and Benjamin are aware of the potential paralysis, reification, and mysticism of a surrealist methodology. Indeed, in “Surrealism,” Benjamin writes that the profane illumination may be a “dangerous” lesson when undertaken without discipline, and it “did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves” (179). Although critiqued by surrealists for the film’s compositional tendency, Dulac’s The Seashell and the Clergyman works against these potential pitfalls of surrealism in its partial incorporation of narrative structures, poetic composition, and its continual provocation of
the audience to take up the work of interpretation. However, Dulac does not impose an interpretation; contra Adorno and Soviet film theories of montage, the film must retain its essential ambiguity, however “dangerous” this ambiguity may be.

Adorno’s critique of surrealism is echoed in his personal response to Benjamin’s evolving work on his Arcades Project; in a letter from November 10, 1938, cited in the introduction, he writes that Benjamin’s “study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched” (AP 129). However, as Peter Demetz has noted, Benjamin already warns, in regards to the profane illumination, against “any irrational romantic, or intoxicating element in that secularized epiphany” (xxxi). Although “the breakneck career of Surrealism” may have carried it successfully over the detritus of the city, Benjamin writes critically of the movement that it “may have taken it also into the humid backroom of spiritualism” (“Surrealism” 180). The danger is in accentuating the mystical, of discovering hidden forces and meanings for mysticism sake, whereas Benjamin’s intent is for a “dialectical optic” that takes us “further” (190). Thus positioned at a productive distance from the movement, Benjamin charts the necessarily difficult course that would avoid a reifying materialism on the one hand, and an abstracted mysticism on the other. The “trick” Benjamin sees as necessary to master “this world of things” is “the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” (“Surrealism” 182). Cohen has shown that whereas the profane illumination in the previous “One-Way Street” had been achieved via a “binary and Marxist description of subject-object Verkehr [traffic],” in “Surrealism,” Benjamin “makes use of the psychoanalytic structure of the rencontre [encounter]” to introduce a third realm, an “ambiguously unconscious realm permeating objective and subjective reality” (189, 192).
The thing—the dialectical image—uncovered by the surrealist narrative possesses a revolutionary energy; a political orientation to history exhumes it from a dormancy enforced by the historicist perspective. It surfaces as an outmoded object (or corpse) of the industrial-capitalist past encountered in the present. Moreover, by locating the dialectical image within the dialectics of the art work (with its ultimate goal of an encounter with an audience), its illumination becomes available to the dreaming collective. Benjamin thus sees in the avant-garde work a means of social change. The frame of the avant-garde text, the author’s composition of “enslaved and enslaving objects,” transforms the object/image and thus lays bare its “revolutionary nihilism” (181-82). The profane illuminations of these texts “transport” the reader, just as the “mystical beloved” transports the poet (Benjamin here quotes Erich Auerbach’s *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*) (181). This relationship of the subject to the “mystical beloved” provides not only a model for profane illumination but is a preferred subject of the surrealist canon. What marks a difference in the lyric narratives I examine here, Dulac’s film and Benjamin’s own critique, is the degree of critical distance framing the illumination.

Although warning against the book’s tendency toward a disappointing spiritualism, Benjamin praises Breton’s *Nadja* for its illustration of the characteristics of

---

13 Cohen notes that the “dialectical image” or *Bild* is the concept that has continuing importance after “Surrealism.” In the surrealist work, “the image designates a form of representation in which the distinction between visual and verbal itself breaks down” since surrealism uses the image “to approximate the representations where unconscious processes come to expression [...] In this kind of representation, as Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* makes amply clear, the difference between visual and verbal modes of signification is ultimately inconsequential” (194).
the profane illumination. Breton’s book shows the profane illumination is recognizable in love, a “dialectics of intoxication” similar to drugs or religion. Benjamin quotes Auerbach, “All the poets of the ‘new style’ […] possess a mystical beloved […] to them all Amor bestows or withholds gifts that resemble an illumination more than sensual pleasure; all are subject to a secret bond that determines their inner and perhaps their outer lives” (181). Benjamin here identifies a key theme of the “new style” of lyric narrative examined in my study; each of the lyric narratives by Woolf, H.D., and Dulac explore the “profane illumination” of the relationship of a poet/artist character and her or his “mystical beloved.” A parallel is implicitly drawn between Proust and Breton, as Benjamin argues, “[t]he lady, in esoteric love, matters least” (181). Indeed, in these self-reflexive lyric narratives, the “other” is most often a screen for projecting onto or a mirror for reflecting the character-artist’s own process of illumination. The beloved doubles the subject, since if “feeling is not located in the head, […] but, rather, in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves” (“One-Way Street” 68). It is precisely Dulac’s authorial intervention that allows *The Seashell and the Clergyman* to not only immerse the audience in the experience of this relationship (the clergyman and his mystical beloved) but to also resist romanticizing or spiritualizing that relationship. The authorial distance disrupts the viewer’s desire to identify absolutely with the character in the text. The dialectical image, the seashell or globe that traffics

---

14 Benjamin also praises its “true, creative synthesis between the art novel and the roman-à-clef” (an apt description of much of H.D.’s prose work and Artaud’s scenario as well) (180).

15 In Benjamin’s “One-Way Street,” a mystical beloved (Asja Lacis) also figures prominently. For example, under “To the Public: Please Protect and Preserve These New Paintings,” Benjamin offers a stunningly beautiful lyric of the traffic between the subject and the beloved (67-68).
between the clergyman and the woman which marks the presence of an implied author or composer, operates doubly for the viewer. It provides a site for a profane illumination into the experience of desire as well as a site for critiquing that desire, (thus the psychoanalytic and feminist readings the shell and globe prompted by viewers’ compulsion to “make sense” of its appearances).

Another key theme of these lyric narratives, singled out in Benjamin’s discussion of surrealism, is the “true face of a city” (182). In mapping a third way (or narrow bridge) through “this world of things,” Benjamin locates at its center “the most dreamed-of of [the surrealist’s] objects, the city of Paris itself” (“Surrealism” 182). Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting” identifies the same productive landscape in London for exploring the traffic between subject and object, brain and eye, as do the surrealists in Paris. Benjamin’s particular point is to argue for the political significance of the surrealist cityscape: “one must overrun and occupy [the city’s inner strongholds] in order to master their fate and, in their fate, in the fate of their masses, one’s own” (183). The surrealists’ city “is a ‘little universe’” which corresponds with “the larger one, the cosmos” (183).

This little universe, where the composer discovers a rhythm between micro and macrocosm, is the ground of lyric narrative, a “crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day. It is the region from which the lyric poetry of Surrealism reports” (183).

---

16 Benjamin’s argument that “[n]o picture by de Chirico or Max Ernst can match the sharp elevations of the city’s inner strongholds” prefigures Adorno’s critique of the stasis of surrealist pictorial art and suggests the importance of literature and cinema’s introduction of time/narrative in staging the profane illumination (182-3).
This grounding of the flight of the mind in the city streets is important for both Woolf and Benjamin in countering “the obligatory misunderstanding of l’art pour l’art” (“Surrealism” 183). The “crisis of the arts,” which surrealism in its moment of transformation finds itself in, is hardly new, but belongs (as his earlier reference to Dante suggests) to “a history of esoteric poetry” (184). Benjamin imagines a book that would illuminate this history in an ideal way: “the deeply grounded composition of an individual who, from inner compulsion, portrays less a historical evolution than a constantly renewed, primal upsurge of esoteric poetry—written in such a way it would be one of those scholarly confessions that can be counted in every century” (184). The lyric narratives composed during this period—in this study, H.D.’s “Murex” and HERmione, Woolf’s essay “The Cinema” and reflections on writing The Waves, and Dulac’s theorization of a “pure cinema”—not only participate in but also portray this iteration of the continually renewed crisis. Like Benjamin, H.D., Woolf, and Dulac struggle to retain a belief in but also critique the necessity and effectualness of an intelligentsia that engages in “magical experiments with words” as part of a “philosophical” project (“Surrealism” 184).

Dulac and Woolf couch their arguments on behalf of the avant-garde cinema in precisely the terms Benjamin defines above; the avant-garde film as one iteration of the recurring “primal upsurge of esoteric poetry.” Rather than aligning the avant-garde film with a hothouse orchid representing the flowering of bourgeois civilization, they describe it as the recurrent outgrowth of a primal root. Woolf’s “The Cinema” evokes these images in her allegory of the cinema’s precocious birth: it is like a tribe of savages who had found on the seashore “fiddles, flutes, saxophones, grand pianos by Erard and
Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy but without knowing a note of music to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time” (352-53). Dulac identifies the avant-garde itself as “a living ferment; it contains the seeds of the conceptions of future generations” (“Avant-Garde”48). Benjamin explains that “art’s sake was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name” (183-4). From his “power station” vantage examining the surrealist movement, Benjamin paradoxically argues that the “esoteric” rides on the current of a “primal upsurge.” The new name Benjamin here attempts to supplant the bogey of “for art’s sake” with, then, is tentatively for “humanity’s sake.”

Benjamin finds that “the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years” has now reached its expected moment of crisis, of transformation from “a highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition” (184, 185). During the pivotal years 1926 to 1931, Woolf, H.D., Benjamin and Dulac shared a sincere belief in the revolutionary potential of a poetics mediated by narrative composition that would reveal the root of experience by moving us beyond language. Surrealism’s “particular task” is to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,” a task that will fail if taken up with an “undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication” (189). However, by exploring the “occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena” with “a dialectical intertwinement,” Benjamin forestalls the “romantic turn of mind” (189).

Essential to this dialectical conception is a distance Benjamin identifies with the act of reading:

The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena. And the most
passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. (190).

Thus the work that art creates, in reading or performing the text, has a critical role in creating an experience of the world of things that is both immediate and removed. Benjamin’s later essay “The Work of Art” further underscores this dialectical conception. It is a dialectical vision Woolf and Dulac emphasize in arguing that the work of art must combine both the experience of the eye being touched—a shock that overcomes habit—and the transformative work of the composing mind. In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin writes that “the shock effect of the film” (created by the “spectator’s process of association” in viewing a succession of constantly changing images) “like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (238).

Benjamin identifies the preferred vehicles of profane illumination—“[t]he reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur” and “that most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude”—and the organ of their process of awakening as a dialectical optic: “poetic politics” (190). Distrusting the optimistic imagery of “social-democratic” politics, surrealism moves “ever closer to the Communist answer” of an organized “pessimism all along the line” (190-1).17 Benjamin’s question—a question for the era—of “what now, what next?” must be answered by the extension of “metaphor and image”

---

17 Here Benjamin’s ironic tone is darkly prophetic: “Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I. G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force” (191). Although the Farben cartel, a super-giant chemical enterprise of six German companies, had only been established four years prior to the essay, Benjamin seems to foresee the Nazi war crimes they would be put on trial for in 1945 in Nuremburg.
which “collide so drastically and so irreconcilably […] in politics” (191). The
“revolutionary intelligentsia” is charged with two tasks, to overthrow “the intellectual
predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses” (191).
It is the latter task that the intelligentsia has failed in and continues to fail in by believing
that such a task could “be performed contemplatively” (191). Benjamin argues that
“contemplation” of the “image sphere” of politics is no longer enough (190). No doubt
with an uneasiness regarding his own contemplative position as a man of letters,
Benjamin asks whether the interruption of the bourgeois artist’s “artistic career” might
not “be an essential part of his new function?” (190). To underscore the point, Benjamin
offers an image of the bourgeois artist abandoning his station of contemplation, an image
strikingly similar to the close of Dulac’s film:

The jokes he [the artist] tells are better for it. And he tells them better. For in the
joke, too, in invective, in misunderstanding, in all cases where an action puts
forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks
with its own eyes, the long-sought image sphere is opened, the world of universal
and integral actualities, where the ‘best room’ is missing—the sphere, in a word,
in which political materialism and physical nature share the inner man, the
psyche, the individual, or whatever else we wish to throw to them, with dialectical
justice, so that no limb remains unrent. (191-2; emphasis added)

The bourgeois intellectual must undergo a “dialectical annihilation” with the proletariat
in order for the realization of poetic politics in actuality rather than only in the space of
textuality, in “a sphere of images, and more concretely, of bodies” (192). Thus far “only
the Surrealists have understood” the extent to which reality must transcend itself in a
“revolutionary discharge” as “demanded by the Communist Manifesto”; the next step, in
Benjamin’s analysis, is the interpenetration of the revolutionary tensions of both body
and image in a “collective innervation” (192).
Benjamin’s diagnosis, then, is that at this moment of transformational crisis the surrealist project must extend from the contemplative revolutionary intelligentsia into the body of the collective—which can only occur if the boundaries of intelligentsia and proletariat are nullified. The “profane illumination” through “technology” can offer a means to initiate the collective into the “image sphere” where a “political and factual” revolution of reality is possible (192). Seven years later, in 1936, Benjamin assesses the technology of the cinema and its potential for profane illumination in “The Work of Art,” but this potential is again weighted with a necessary pessimism. While itself unconventional as criticism, “Surrealism” is, like the other lyric narratives of this study, still a text of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Although bearing the seeds of a revolutionary pessimism, Benjamin’s vision of a just “dialectical annihilation” of the foundations from which he speaks (echoed in Woolf’s *Three Guineas*) is necessarily optimistic. Despite the depths into the cityscape and psyche and the poetic heights of metaphysical abstraction that lyric could achieve for these authors, their standpoints of privilege were still on the threshold. Self-reflexive contemplation of injustice and the profane illumination would remain their necessary, if limited, methodologies. Benjamin, Dulac, and Woolf, participating in and contemplating a primal upsurge of esoteric poetry as a political imperative, maintain a tempered hope that the shocks embedded in their lyric narrative texts might act as the psychic “innervation” needed for the body politic.
CHAPTER 6

THE INTERVAL OF MONTAGE

6.1 Crossroads: Aesthetics and Politics in the 1930s

H.D.’s representative of the high modernist avant-garde in *Palimpsest*, Raymonde Ransome, had reached a crossroads in the late 1920s: how to negotiate, on the one hand, an aesthetic solipsism that would isolate the writer from her audience, and, on the other, a conventional style for a popular audience that would cut the writer off from her vision? This artist’s paradox would become tangential in the 1930s, a hesitancy and consideration not possible in the face of changing socio-economic conditions, the advent of the sound film, the shifting preferences of audiences who were increasingly uninterested in such questions, and the rise of totalitarianism. The social, political, and economic crises of the 1930s meant a crossroads for high modernism. Indeed, some would argue that it lies buried there. However, Woolf, H.D., Benjamin, and Dulac continued to work, developing lyric narrative by turning increasingly to the technique of montage in order to respond to this period of transition. As a comprehensive discussion of the evolution of these authors’ works through a “low dishonest decade”¹ is not possible here, this chapter

¹ W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939.”
will examine the 1930s discourses about aesthetics and politics, how the authors of this study negotiated them, and how our retrospective narratives of the 1930s (the Auden generation, the end of modernism) have or have not accounted for the development of lyric narrative in late modernism. This discussion will provide the ground for a discussion in chapter seven of the use of montage in their World War II texts—H.D.’s *The Gift*, Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*.

Although critics have marked 1930 as the terminus of modernism, the challenges to modernism during the decade led to an intense reconsideration and, for some, the development of the modernist text rather than its end. As the previous chapters have shown, the late 1920s had already meant a reassessment for many modernists who heard the goblin rumblings of the approach of the 1930s crises, which were to include the worldwide depression, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism, and the failure of communism. In the arts, these pressures, in addition to the increasing popularity of radio and journalism, influenced many readers to prefer more conventional literature, a shift that, combined with the arrival of the sound film, has been described as the devaluation

---

2 Bradbury and McFarlane designate 1930 as the end of their survey of modernism, since after that point:

elements of Modernism seem to be reallocated, as history increasingly came back in for intellectuals, as, with the loss of purpose and social cohesion, and the accelerating pace of technological change, modernity was a visible scene open to simple report, and as the world depression tends increasingly to bring back political and economic determinism into the intellectual ideologies. (51-52)

This formulation suggests history was not an essential element of modernism and that all intellectuals fell into step with determinist ideologies. In contrast, writing of Woolf’s 1930s work, Linden Peach cites the two frames of analysis that have hindered readings of modernists in the 1930s, as identified by Valentine Cunningham in “The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents”: “a literary-historical frame that ‘involves a sort of knee-jerk division between Modernism and the Thirties’ and a cultural-historical frame that denies anything written in the 1930s ‘the highest literary merit’” (195).
of autonomous art—that is, the avant-garde or high modernist literary text and the non-commercial film. For high modernists, then, the first half of the decade meant confronting how their art could or should respond to the political crises, the increasing loss of a support network and audience for the experimentation that had burgeoned during the previous decade, and a critique by members of the younger generation of writers who were increasingly unable or unwilling to share their elders’ perspectives.

In his conclusion to *Axel’s Castle* (1931), Edmund Wilson describes the crossroads writers who were then uninterested in society for scientific study or for satire as a choice between the courses of Axel or Rimbaud. If one chose Axel’s course, “one shuts oneself up in one’s own private world, cultivating one’s private fantasies, encouraging one’s private manias, ultimately preferring one’s absurdest chimeras to the most astonishing contemporary realities, ultimately mistaking one’s chimeras for realities” (Wilson 324). If one chose the course of Rimbaud, “one tries to leave the twentieth century behind—to find the good life in some country where modern manufacturing methods and modern democratic institutions do not present any problems of the artist because they haven’t yet arrived,” a longing for the primitive that often meant silence (Wilson 325). For Woolf, H.D., Benjamin and Dulac, who were interested in society not only for sociological study and critical satire but also for the potential beauty and complexity therein, neither course would serve. The year 1931 marked a deeper engagement with politics in their works. Of course, they were also well acquainted with the impulse of a return to a pre-fall pastoral or primitive world as well as the lure of the

---

3 See Peter Bürger’s chapter “Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society” in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which historicizes the term.
aesthetic achievements possible in the ivory tower of “one’s private world.” However, the dialectics of their montage methods during this period—combining documentary, accumulation of detail, and a refracting of perspectives in order to create a participatory poetics—made possible a course different than that of Axel or Rimbaud.

Wilson writes that the “writers who have largely dominated the literary world of the decade 1920-30,” high modernists such as Eliot, Proust, and Joyce, “will no longer serve as guides” and are “sometimes veritable literary museums” (330, 328). While I argue that the montage techniques of Woolf, H.D., Benjamin, and Dulac are concerned with preservation, they are not concerned with preservation in the manner of a “museum” or a status quo. In contrast to the nihilism characteristic of other late modernists, they seek to preserve the impulse to create. It is precisely the examples of Woolf and H.D. (partly because of their antipathy toward dominance in the literary world) that could guide young writers to the desired negotiation (which Wilson finally proposes) of a third way rather than the choice of Axel and Rimbaud. In contrast to “literary museums,” their texts preserve in arranging their fragments, images, and vantages for future audiences to lay hands on in their roles of deferred collaboration. In other words, rather than creating inviolable works of art roped off from audiences so as to preserve an ideal that would outlast the crises, they created works suspended in a perpetual “in progress” state by making the audience’s interpretation an essential part of the text’s performance and the mechanism of its potential alchemy.

---

4 Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is the go-to text for examining modernist montage. These later modernist texts differ in the relationship they create with the reader, insistence on a compounded “now,” and preservation of hope for the future. Rather than shoring fragments against *their* ruin, these texts shore fragments as ruins for future readers to make use of.
This attention to the role of the audience had already marked H.D.’s, Woolf’s, and Benjamin’s interest in and difference from surrealism. As Richard Wolin has argued of Benjamin, the “chips of Messianic time” in the text’s revelation of \textit{Jetztzeit} (or the moment of being in the case of Woolf) is a “search for transcendence [that] transpires, like the surrealists’, \textit{within} the sphere of immanence” (98). In the 1920s, Benjamin had been drawn to the surrealists’ lyric achievements, sharing with Dulac, Woolf, and H.D. an interest in the movement’s lyric aspects: the emphasis on the \textit{flâneur}, the openness to continual interpretation of the dream as a text rooted in a material reality, and the profane illumination in a poetry of decline. Like the early surrealist manifestos, their 1930s works insist on the artwork’s rootedness to material contingencies and its life in the audience. However, the audience must also be given entryways into the text—whether through an authorial presence that withdraws, recognized frameworks used in a new context, or the lure of submerged beauty—if the audience is indeed to take up the participatory work of art (a consideration surrealists often rejected as compromising).

These high modernists’ impulse toward the pure lyricality surrealism proposed was tempered by a renewed attention to the prosaic in the political contingencies of the 1930s. Rather than responding to the decade’s crises with a renewed interest in realist narrative, however, they renewed their attention to the productive tension found in balancing poetic and narrative modes. Benjamin, Dulac, Woolf, and H.D. shared an interest in aspects of documentary, Brecht’s emphasis on anonymity for the author and the principle of interruption, and an ambivalence regarding the decline of the social position of the intellectual. We see this ambivalence toward the abdication of their privileged roles as artists and thinkers in their pessimism in the face of fascism’s
devaluation of the free-thinking intellectual, on the one hand, and in their anarchic optimism in light of the possible fulfillment of the Marxist ideal of an intellectual common ground for subsequent generations, on the other.

The turn to montage in their 1930s works is marked by several such ambivalences. A notable one is the necessary relinquishing of what Randall Stevenson, following Gérard Genette and Mikhail Bakhtin, has described as “one of the most obvious appeals of narrative art […] the possibility it offers of reshaping into desired or significant order the flow of life” (88). For H.D. and Woolf particularly, montage continued to mean less an objective reportage arranged to form a comprehensible narrative (characteristic of the British Movietone newsreels), than the alternatives to such a linear narrative track that the processes of memory, quilting, and over-writing offered. The high modernist impulse of finding significance in the flux of life through form hardly disappears here; indeed, the technique of montage and interruption is essential in preserving or creating such a significance. However, the form or ordering these works pursue hardly aligned with dominant discourses, and, moreover, refuses the closure that narrative order promises, instead requiring the reader to discover potential significance.

In his montage of notes in the “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” convolute of the Arcades, Benjamin reminds us that the methods of constructing history are no more objective than the elusive mechanisms of memory: “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [Eingedenken]” (N8,1: 471). Ernst Bloch observed in a 1928 review of “One-Way Street” that Benjamin favored a principle of montage influenced by surrealism: “Surrealistic philosophy is exemplary as a montage of fragments that, however, remain pluralistic and unconnected” (qtd. in Wolin 99).
Indeed, Benjamin confirmed that in 1927 the surrealist montage of Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* had partly inspired his embarkation on his cultural history of Paris in the Second Empire, a project which would take as its “[m]ethod” “literary montage” (N1a,8: 460). During the Berlin crises of 1933, Benjamin developed this method further in writing “A Berlin Childhood around 1900,” which re-visions history as a “form of remembrance,” a method also used by H.D. in *The Gift* and Woolf in *A Sketch of the Past*. Rather than aspiring to a singular “objective” camera-eye view, which was characteristic of the younger generation of modernists, such as Christopher Isherwood’s work in the 1930s, or a documentarist’s reality, favored by Georg Lukács who condemned Bloch’s notion of “montage,” H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin further elaborate the splicing of subjective and objective realities of their earlier works. Refusing a didactic, closed presentation of “a” reality, the pluralist potential of montage enabled these authors to mentor audiences into a role of production with their texts. Such a method opened the possibility of a significant form, yet accepted the risks of entrusting

---

5 In “Realism in the Balance,” Lukács dismisses the anti-realists and “pseudo-realists,” condemns the “[s]o-called avant-garde literature,” and argues for a return to realism to retrieve literature from irreparable decay. Lukács quotes Bloch’s analysis of Joyce’s narrative method to show how “Bloch does as a theorist exactly what the Expressionists and Surrealists do as artists.” Bloch, writing presumably of *Finnegans Wake*, notes, “Montage can now work wonders; in the old days it was only thoughts that could dwell side by side, but now things can do the same, at least in these floodplains, these fantastic jungles of the void” (*AP* 34-5). According to Bloch, “Surrealism is nothing if not montage […] it is an account of the chaos of reality as actually experienced, with all its caesuras and dismantled structures of the past” (*AP* 35). Lukács critiques modernism’s “decision to abandon any attempt to mirror objective reality, to give up the artistic struggle to shape the highly complex mediations in all their unity and diversity and to synthesize them as characters in a work of literature. For this approach permits no creative composition, no rise and fall” (*AP* 43). Conversely, the interruptive procedure of montage suggests that giving up the synthesis of the total artwork enables a breakthrough from the flat *Schein* of the organic realism Lukács posits.
audiences with the creation of meaning and of destabilizing the relationship of the moment of the story-world and the readers’ moment.

In refuting Georg Lukács’s critique of modernism, Stevenson has argued that it is more reasonable to ask of “the work of art” that it serve “to shape and facilitate imagination of how the world might be ordered differently,” and it is to this “demand” that modernism speaks (221). H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin use montage techniques in their late modernist works in order to break open the concept of time as progressing in a chronological, historicist order. They attempt to actualize a sense of time that counters a historicist time condemned to “progress” understood as a recurring narrative of war, oppression, and decay; however, their alternate sense of time is not transcendent, but immanent, within a material reality. Consequently, they navigate a Scylla and Charybdis, attempting to avoid both a false nostalgia for an edenic pastoral as well as any so-called universal realm (whether a Jungian primal history or a religious transcendence of the material world) that lies beyond the here and now. In order to examine how the world has been ordered and how it might be ordered differently, the montage of their works locates reality in multiple senses of time. These texts do not reject the existence or influence of the past in favor of an autonomous “now,” as many in the younger generation did; although, the concept of “here and now” is central to each. Writing of Benjamin’s interest in surrealism, Wolin explains that Benjamin’s concept of “now time”

---

6 The phrase “here and now” saturates literature of the 1930s and early 1940s, for example: it was a possible title of Woolf’s The Years, it appears as a prominent theme in T.S. Eliot’s “East Coker” (1940), Aldous Huxley’s Eyeless in Gaza (1936), Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities (vol. 1, 1930), Wyndham Lewis’s Men Without Art (1934), and Benjamin’s Arcades: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. […] Thus Strindberg (in To Damascus!): hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now” (N9a,1: 473).
and theory of “the constellation or dialectical image,” which are central to *The Arcades Project*, are related to the concept of “nunc stans,” defined by Franz Rosenzweig as signifying “that ‘mankind is redeemed from the transience of the moment,’ and the latter is ‘refashioned as the ever-persisting and thus intransient, as eternity’” (98). The past is not fixed or distant, but is revealed as coexistent within the passing present. In differing ways for each, the transient moment becomes the site of redemptive vision.

Given the intensity of the moment of their writing—the period leading up to and during the Second World War—it may seem bizarre that the *The Gift, Between the Acts*, and *Arcades Project* are centrally concerned with how the past is staged. These texts uproot the nineteenth century, examining the primal or pre-history or the Victorian bourgeois domains within the narrow margin of the “here and now” of World War and under the dim light of an unknowable yet immanent future. Writing during the Blitz in London, H.D. dwells on the “two-edged manner” of Freud’s utterance in saying the word “*Time*”; she notes the “store of contradictory emotions” he seems to pack into the word, emotions which are deftly unpacked both in H.D.’s *The Gift* and Woolf’s *Between the Acts*: “there was irony, entreaty, defiance, with a vague, tender pathos. It seemed as if the word was surcharged, an explosive that might, at any minute go off” (*Tribute* 75). These texts give the lie to the seeming homogeneity of the “Tick, tick, tick” of machine-made time (Woolf, *BTA* 154); within the rhythm of their measures, “timeless time” is
uncovered in the interrupted interval as a bomb compounded of fragments of time passed waiting for their now of recognizability (Benjamin, “Theses” 257).\(^7\)

Returning to Wilson’s allegory published in 1931, if there has been an “oscillation” between the opposite poles of objective and subjective art since symbolism’s “reaction against nineteenth-century Naturalism,” then, according to Wilson, either the decade will swing “toward objectivity again […].  Or—what would be preferable and is perhaps more likely—this oscillation may finally cease” (331-32). In rejecting the “false alternatives” of either objectivity or subjectivity for their dialectical relationship instead, Woolf, H.D., Benjamin and Dulac present the ideal that Wilson hoped for (332). It is not the younger generation but members of the older generation during the 1930s who, in incorporating strategies such as a poetics of the prosaic via montage, fulfill what Wilson asks of writers: namely, to effect “in literature a revolution” by revealing “to the imagination a new flexibility and freedom,” and although they make us “aware in them of things that are dying,” they “none the less break down the walls of the present and wake us to the hope and exaltation of the untried, unsuspected possibilities of human thought and art” (336). It is this dialectic, the ability to reveal

---

\(^7\) In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin quotes the fifth stanza of Gershom Scholem’s poem, “Gruss vom Angelus,” in an epigraph to his description of Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” the angel of history:

\begin{verbatim}
Mein Flügel is zum Schwung bereit, 
ich kehrte gern zurück, 
denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit, 
ich hätte wenig Glück. (257)
\end{verbatim}

The third line is translated in the “Theses” as, “If I stayed timeless time,” and in Benjamin’s letters as, “If I stayed in timeless time.” The possible meanings seem to meet each other—to stay “timeless time” would mean to stay in it; yet, the former suggests that “timeless time” itself would be stayed for the many, whereas the latter removes the speaker from the many. Translating \textit{lebendige} into English is difficult; the entire line might be more literally translated as: “if I remained also living time.” The effect of the ambiguity of the tense and the meaning of “living/vital” or “eternal” time, gives the entire stanza a \textit{lebendig} effect.
what is passing, to open up the present, and to instill hope for the future, that is peculiar to the 1930s works of the high modernists of my study in contrast to the younger generation.

6.2 Generations of Late Modernism

Although the characteristics of the “Auden generation” of writers have received a great deal of attention, largely due to Samuel Hynes’s excellent study, the category imposes a false homogeny. Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* has usefully argued for the term “late modernism” to describe those other 1930s artists—such as Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Samuel Beckett—who continue the modernist aesthetic through the decade but turn a deadly satiric eye on the formalist and messianic impulse of their “high modernist” precursors and contemporaries. Miller argues that late modernism “recognize[s] its own fatal complicity with the fallen world it explores” (194). That fallen world included not only the loss of the modernist landscape (the subject in the socio-political matrix of the city of Empire), as Jed Esty has shown, but also the ideal of a universal aesthetic. H.D. described the latter sense of loss with a touch of satire in her 1926 novel *Palimpsest*, in which her poet Raymonde searches vainly for a universal ethical-aesthetic law in the avant-garde work of art. Yet, in contrast to Miller’s late modernists, H.D. managed to retain some variation of this ideal (although not of a universal, static ethics via aesthetics) throughout her career. It is perhaps having had and lost the pre-First World War world, a period in which imagining such a progressive role for art was possible, that marks H.D.’s and Woolf’s sympathy with and yet difference from the younger generation in their
1930s works. Belying the false dichotomy of the Auden generation versus the high modernists languishing in their ivory towers, in Woolf’s *The Years* and *Between the Acts* and in H.D.’s *Tribute to Freud* and *The Gift* there is a strong generational emphasis, both an attempt and a depiction of an attempt to pass along a pre-war vision—of collective, critical, and creative work toward a better whole (acknowledging such an endpoint was unattainable)—to the younger generation who had been deprived of the conditions that make such a vision possible.

Miller argues compellingly for 1926 (the year of the General Strike in Britain) as the year marking the first emergence of “late modernist literature,” acknowledging that “this emergent literature appears in tandem with a still developing corpus of high modernism. James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* […] and other monuments of high modernism share the field with a new generation of late modernist works” (10). My examination complements Miller’s work in questioning the existing narratives of the “corpus of high modernism,” but by focusing on the still vital body of high modernist work that has tended to signify failure, decline, or escapism in existing narratives. While sharing many similarities with the late modernists of Miller’s case studies of the 1930s, my literary “high modernists”—H.D. and Woolf—differ in that they manage to be generous but not condescending in their relationship with previous and subsequent generations, self-critical and aware of their own aesthetics and ethics, and, despite their resolute look into the darkest forces of culture, also earnest in their belief in art’s value. This belief in art’s value—personal, as well as social and political—marks a primary difference of their late modernism from other late modernists’ move into postmodernism. It is also a source of the strong
reactions the texts receive from present-day readers, readers for whom such a belief in art as having a truth-seeking or messianic value resonates with vain naivety or solemn tragedy.

H.D.’s and Woolf’s 1930s writing on the possibilities and pitfalls of a period of transition for aesthetics and politics rebuts the bogey of nostalgic retreat or decadent escapism that characterizes many “end of modernism” narratives.8 In “A Letter to a Young Poet” (1932) and “The Leaning Tower” (1940), Woolf identifies the gap between modernists of her generation and the younger generation, who were necessarily moving away from modernism’s concerns and style in favor of an objective, realist, political approach. As Stevenson has noted, the younger generation of writers in the 1930s turned to political ideologies such as communism and socialism (and I would add fascism) to create an ideal civilization “in actuality,” versus the alternative to reality they believed the mythos of Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf presented. This generation directed their fiction, not inward, but instead “at the immediate ‘public causes’ and political problems of their world” (Stevenson 205). While the younger generation hardly formed a cohesive whole, as Hynes problematically suggests, a faction of the younger generation did lead a critique of high modernism in the 1930s. This critique is particularly significant for its inauguration of a more resounding repudiation of modernism, particularly as articulated by Georg Lukács, viewing modernism as lacking any “political or social relevance” (Stevenson 208).

8 Georg Lukács’s “Ideology of Modernism” (1955) is perhaps the first commanding account of this narrative. Hugh Kenner’s The Pound Era has become emblematic of the classic narrative of modernism; in contrast, Marjorie Perloff’s The Futurist Moment (focusing on other groups obscured by the Pound Era, particularly Italian and Russian Futurism) is a forerunner of new approaches (like Miller’s and Esty’s) to narratives of modernism.
While the broad strokes of this view may be true in some instances, Woolf and H.D. were hardly impervious to the younger generation’s discontents. Moreover, young poets’ personal interest in Woolf and H.D.—each had a small, varied, and dedicated following—suggest that this generation did not on the whole reject their precursors. As Woolf explains in “The Leaning Tower,” they shared the same ambivalent perch; it was a subsequent generation that would retrospectively register a stark divide in drawing up a narrative of the end of modernism. Stevenson’s balanced reconsideration of Lukács’s condemnation of modernism identifies two key points I want to draw out of Woolf’s and H.D.’s reexamination and implicit defense of their modernist projects. While modernist works are “difficult and challenging,” they create what Barthes describes as the writerly text, activating the reader to act as producer of the text and enabling the reader to look at and beyond “‘social reality’ in its current shape” (217); rather than lacking in morality, modernist morality lies in leaving the reader free “to determine morality for themselves” (218). In arranging fragments rather than a totality of social reality, encouraging readers to engage creatively in examining the interstices of how this reality has been narrated, and refusing narrative closure and didactic commentary, the technique of montage particularly enabled this alternative high modernist morality. As I shall show, in “The Leaning Tower” Woolf returns to her argument first articulated in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (1927), holding that it is literature’s ability to galvanize a vision in the reader “to preserve and to create” that will help them “cross the gulf” (CE 2: 181).
6.3 Woolf’s “A Letter to a Young Poet” from Anon

Although various critics, including James Carey and Lawrence Rainey, have portrayed Woolf as situated across a wide gulf from social realities, one could hardly describe her as isolated from politics during 1931, the year she published *The Waves*. As Hermione Lee notes in her introduction of *The Hogarth Letters*, the year marked the beginning of an intensified involvement with current politics and the poet’s place (or lack of place) in the current and future culture.⁹ “A Letter to a Young Poet” appeared in a Hogarth Press project devised by Leonard and Virginia Woolf and John Lehmann, who, having just come down from Cambridge and completed a first book of poems, had at the beginning of the year been taken on as a manager (Lehmann, *Recollections* 26).

Lehmann came to the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press with an attitude of “hero-worship” toward Woolf. He particularly noted her influence on him “as a poet, by the skill with which she managed to transform the material of poetry into the prose-form of the novel.” Yet he also noted, “that in itself seemed to me one of the major artistic problems of our time, arising out of the terror and tension, the phantasmagoria of modern life” (29). Indeed, it would prove the point of contention in Woolf’s essays addressed to the younger generation of poets. Lehmann has rightly identified Woolf’s modernist project—to join the poetic and narrative modes in order to meet the complexity of the present moment. “A Letter to a Young Poet” and “The Leaning Tower” are texts that urge the younger generation to locate themselves in relationship to a continuous tradition in which poets in

---

⁹ Numerous critics, notably Jane Marcus and Alex Zwerdling, have already shown Woolf’s sustained interest in politics and “the real world.” Here, I’ll simply note that three years previous Woolf published *A Room of One’s Own*, a text arguing that a basic material equality for all is necessary in its analysis of women’s position in history and as artists.
recurrent modernities have joined in that project, from Shakespeare to Baudelaire to T.S. Eliot. Woolf’s notion of a continuous tradition, however, is not a historicist literary criticism of an ascending progression of canonical authors, each new model proving superior. Rather, for Woolf, while each poet makes possible the next, a continuous tradition meant that any poet writing in his or her present moment has equally at his or her disposal a connection to Shakespeare, to Baudelaire, to Eliot, and the achievements of their works.

Notwithstanding the tribulations of employer and employee between Leonard and Lehmann, Virginia’s role as a mentor to a young poet proved ideal. Lehmann recounts, she had “an intense curiosity about my own life and the lives of my friends in my generation […] She liked to hear all about what we wanted to do in poetry, in painting, in novel-writing” (30). Admiring The Waves and aware of Woolf’s anxieties regarding the reception of the work, Lehmann had proposed that she write one of the “Hogarth Letters, pamphlets containing about 6,000 or 7,000 words each” (34). Woolf replied with enthusiasm, eager to tackle her, as she wrote, “ill-considered & wild & annoying ideas about prose and poetry”; she would “pour forth all I can think of about you young, & we old, & novels – how damned they are – & poetry, how dead,” and would read Spender, Auden, and Day Lewis, asking them “to join in” (qtd. Lehmann 34). As The Waves appeared to acclaim, Woolf’s thoughts on the topic shifted subtly; she asked, “Why should poetry be dead?” (34).

Negative critiques of Woolf’s “Letter” and “The Leaning Tower” have generally failed to register Woolf’s self-critical attention to her own “wild & annoying ideas about prose and poetry.” Rather than seeing these articles as condemnations of the younger
generation out of myopic snobbery, it is more illuminating to observe that it is in “joining in” with the new poets that Woolf is able to reconsider the work she currently undertakes. Much of what may seem “priggish” in Woolf’s “Letter” (Lee xxi) is in fact self-criticism of her struggle to join prose and poetry in the new climate of the 1930s. Woolf’s “Letter” appeared in 1932, and Lehmann aptly describes the “line” of her critique: his generation of poets proved “too introverted; wanted to publish too young; and failed in their attempt to assimilate the raw facts of life into their poetry,” but her main critique was their “ranging themselves into opposing schools and movements,” which she called “dressing up” (34-5). Lehmann, in retrospect, rejected Woolf’s critique as “at variance with her own bold striking out for revolutionary experiments a dozen years before”; he finds “her sympathy with what my generation was trying to do was imperfect,” a deficiency that appears “more glaringly in her later essay, The Leaning Tower” (35).

Woolf’s sympathy was imperfect, as her letter-composing persona is at pains to acknowledge, but it was nonetheless a profound sympathy, as both her “Letter” and the later essay reveal. In the novel-essay The Pargiters which broke apart in Woolf’s hands (an image she uses to describe the younger generation’s poems) to become The Years (1937) and Three Guineas (1938), Woolf herself was struggling to do precisely what these younger writers were “trying to do.” As Lee notes, the “Letter” reflects Woolf’s

10 For an account of the genealogy of Three Guineas and The Years, see Mitchel A. Leaska’s introduction to The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years. In Woolf’s diary, Anne Olivier Bell (as does Woolf in a marginal note dated 1934) traces “the conception of [the] two books” to an entry dated 23 January 1931: “Too much excited, alas, to get on with The Waves. One goes on making up The Open Door, or whatever it is to be called. The didactive demonstrative style conflicts with the dramatic: I find it hard to get back inside Bernard again” (D 4: 6). Bell lists the titles Woolf variously gave the texts during their “convoluted and entangled history” between 1931 and publication: The Years in 1937 and Three Guineas in 1938 (6).
anxiety regarding her work on *The Years*, “the novel in which she wrestled most painfully with the relationship between art and propaganda” and the issue of “solipsism” (xxii). Acknowledging that she had achieved a new freedom and immunity in her work, nonetheless, from the early conception of *The Pargiters* in 1931 to the publications of the final two texts seven years later, Woolf wrestled with the texts’ form, with finding a method to achieve the effects she desired. *Three Guineas*, a rhetorically deft, book-length essay documenting patriarchal society as the basis of the advent of fascist ideology and war, takes the form of three successive letters and included five photographs of men in the professions—a general (30), heralds (32), a university procession (34), a judge (94), an archbishop (184)—in its 1938 publication. In the layering of letters, images, extensive footnotes, and voices, the text attests to Woolf’s burgeoning use of montage as a technique to engage with politics while avoiding propaganda. Indeed, Woolf’s use of “three bound volumes” (scrapbooks of news clippings, annotations, and images compiled between 1931 and 1937) in constructing *Three Guineas* (Silver 255-7) evokes not a conventional “March of Time” newsreel that covers over its juxtapositions with authoritative narrative (parodied in Woolf’s text in a patriarchal dress pageant), but the “thought-provoking juxtapositions” of Germaine Dulac’s France-Actualités newsreels (Reynolds 74).11

Dulac’s small film company, with no institutional base in the 1930s but with a stock of “cultural capital” that she had earned as a “slightly eccentric figure […] a

11 Elena Gualtieri discusses Woolf’s use of this material and offers a compelling reading of Woolf’s use and placement of photographs in “*Three Guineas* and the Photograph.” Gualtieri, who also notes similarities to Benjamin, writes that “The failure of language, its inadequacy when faced with the enormity and monstrousity of war, is a leitmotif” and “lies at the roots of the politics of ‘secrecy’ (TG, p. 330) embodied in the idea of a Society of Outsiders” (173).
convinced socialist and feminist, who dressed in a masculine manner, chain-smoked, and latterly limped using a silver-topped cane,” continued cultivating what Woolf would describe as a “Society of Outsiders” in Three Guineas (204), supporting “various minority, militant or avant-garde films” and producing her own avant-garde newsreels (Reynolds, “Germaine Dulac” 77). Dulac’s 1935 documentary-montage film Le cinema au service de l’histoire strikingly parallels the backward gaze and composition of Woolf’s The Years and Between the Acts and the rhetorical style of Three Guineas. Siân Reynolds writes, while “not explicit in its politics, it carries an implicit message […] The film ended with a series of questions: if four ‘mystiques’ were in the air: the Marxist, the ‘racial’ (Hitler), the fascist (Mussolini), or the proletarian one, which would prevail? There is no authorial answer” (76). While anonymity and withholding comment are essential to these projects, it should be noted that Woolf and Dulac take absolute care in compiling and arranging their montages, directing the gaze, unearthing and making use of the unseen of the everyday and the refuse of history—and indeed argue for their authority to do so precisely because of their position as outsiders. Their use of montage aligns with Benjamin’s statement of method in the Arcades Project:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (N1a,8: 460)

While it would be false to claim they had embraced the death of the author, the montage method marks a decisive shift in the author’s role and self-conception. In directing a montage from and of the margins, Dulac, Benjamin, H.D. and Woolf characteristically withhold an “authorial answer.” Whereas the younger generation and “writers of the left”
during the 1930s tended to preach and proffer their sole perspective, Woolf and Dulac required the audience to act as producers not only in making the links between images and ideas, but also in recognizing their responsibility to join in and “make up” the present and future.

Taking up the device of letter-writer that she would use in *Three Guineas*, Woolf proposes in “A Letter to a Young Poet” to “put myself in your place” (*CE* 2: 185).\(^{12}\) As in *Three Guineas*, Woolf dramatizes the necessity and difficulty (she continually draws attention to the limits of her vision) of imagining the point of view of the other. She imagines herself observing the young poet’s writing process and, in doing so, diagnoses her own difficulties as a writer in October 1931\(^ {13}\) and delineates the different track they both should join in taking. The new poetry of Lehmann, Spender, and Cecil Day Lewis is “cracked,” unable to balance “the poetical” and the “shock” of the prosaic, leaving the reader able only to “contemplate coldly, critically, and with distaste” (*CE* 2: 187).\(^ {14}\) Woolf’s aim, which she foundered at in the long years of writing *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, was to continue to pursue the dialectic of the poetic and prosaic in such a way that achieved a dialectic of contemplative distance and intimate immediacy—to draw the

---

\(^{12}\) In *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, Melba Cuddy-Keane has shown how the epistolary form enables Woolf to avoid speaking as an authority (whether in politics and aesthetics, or in representing the other) and to “engage a discourse antithetical to the doctrinaire critical voice” (75).

\(^{13}\) As throughout “A Letter,” Woolf echoes *A Room of One’s Own* here, where her narrator stood at a window wondering “what London was doing on the morning of the twenty-sixth of October 1928. […] Nobody cared a straw—and I do not blame them—for the future of fiction, the death of poetry or the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind” (95).

\(^{14}\) Decades later, Lewis’s *The Lyric Impulse* (1965) would echo many of Woolf’s claims. While his study of the lyric is uneven, his theories about the place of the lyric in society are suggestive of Woolf’s use and citation of the lyric throughout *Between the Acts*. 

367
reader in to take her place as producer, able to inhabit characters and yet see their experience at a critical distance.

Quoting three unimpressive excerpts of poems by Lehmann, Spender, and Lewis (although she does not name them), Woolf catalogues a failure of the lyric “I” as both an aesthetic and political response to the moment. The poems remind Woolf of the domineering “I” warned against in *A Room of One’s Own*; if the younger generation fails to recognize themselves as part of a continuous line of poets, they nonetheless seem to bear the mark of a patriarchal tradition. The three poems are “about nothing, if not about the poet himself,” but unlike those of “Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley,” these poems “shut out” the other—whether lover, tyrant, or the “mystery of the world,” and thus the reader as well (*CE* 2: 189). Woolf’s writing, too, is often about nothing if not the artist herself. However, her self-reflexive scenes of the artist attempt an openness different from these poems, and the artist is invariably placed in relation to the other or the “mystery of the world.” In contrast, the young poet’s artist “is a self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn. In other words the poet is much less interested in what we have in common than in what he has apart” (*CE* 2: 189).

15 In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s narrator reads “a new novel by Mr. A” and finds the pages dominated by “a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’” (99). Her message for a new generation of women writers is to be wary of the self-consciousness that blocks the interplay of the androgynous mind, to instead identify with a tradition of the latter—“Shakespeare was androgynous; and so was Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb and Coleridge. Shelley perhaps was sexless. […] In our time Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman” (103).

16 In Woolf’s diary, August 7 1939, she writes of the tendency of writers toward “commentary” as due to the unsettled social climate, contrasting their environment with Wordsworth’s: “As if the mind must be allowed to settle undisturbed over the object in order to secrete the pearl” (5: 229).
The two difficulties Woolf identifies with the poems are the poet’s “desperate determination to tell the truth about himself,” which is a necessary starting place but solipsistic if a stopping point, and the failure to find the “right relationship” between “raw fact” and the “poetical” (CE 2: 190-91). Although Lehmann sees Woolf’s critique as “at variance with her own bold striking out for revolutionary experiments a dozen years before” (35), the “Letter” itself draws attention to what “we have in common.” Woolf refers to her generation’s fight for literature, their novels’ rejection of the “accustomed grooves” that their Victorian forefathers duly heralded as a “[d]eath in literature” (189-90). Woolf’s point is that the difficulties of this generation of poets are symptoms of the struggle for a new life for poetry rather than its death, not unlike her own unsteady beginnings in prose. Her admonishments underscore the commonality between the difficulties the young poet faces now and the difficulties Woolf continues to face as part of the older generation. 

In her diary between 1931 and 1938, Woolf notes repeatedly her inability to achieve the right balance of “fact & fiction,” of the “creative, subconscious faculty” and “propaganda”; “the transition from the colloquial to the lyrical, the particular to the general”; she asks herself, “intellectual argument in the form of art: I mean how give ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life the form of art?” (4: 350, 281, 236, 161). While The Years proved a popular success, buttressed by the popularity of the family chronicle genre, critics expecting the lyric experimentation of The Waves were disappointed.

17 In Between the Acts, Woolf depicts the threat of annihilation in war as making possible a connection between the older and younger generation—between Lucy Swithin and William Dodge. Dodge, speaking to Isa, thinks of Lucy, “‘The doom of sudden death hanging over us […] There’s no retreating and advancing. […] for us as for them.’ The future shadowed their present” (114).
Victoria Middleton has argued that the “eloquent condemnation” of critics has failed to consider that Woolf had “sought to write a novel that would call into question her own aesthetic” (158). Breaking the mold of The Waves, Woolf became deeply enmeshed in the challenges of integrating art and politics. Middleton writes that the novel is composed as a “deliberate failure”; at times it is “self-parodic” and “finally anti-visionary,” as “both product and condemnation of conditions depicted within the novel,” that is, “a convergence of particular social forces and aesthetic preoccupations” (158). Woolf believed “that excessive awareness of social, economic and political crises fosters excessive self-consciousness” (Middleton 171), the over-bearing “I” so destructive to art, and thus chose the strategy of portraying the foundering of the artist in a culture in crisis.

Throughout Woolf’s “Letter to a Young Poet,” she evokes the theses laid out in A Room of One’s Own that she would expand upon in Three Guineas in order to offer the generation a hand across a “tumultuous and transitional” era, one she had herself navigated in the last decade and breasted anew in the 1930s (CE 2: 191). She argues for the essential continuity of the primal impulse of poetry. Science, the loss of religion, war—these are not enough to:

destroy the most profound and primitive of instincts, the instinct of rhythm. All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the

---

18 Woolf opens “A Letter” with a witty analysis of the “art of letter-writing” in the present moment that proposes a Marxist line. Whereas the “old gentleman” lamented the death of the art of letter-writing with the arrival of the penny post, Woolf sees it as a child of the latter (CE 2: 182). By making the art accessible to all by divesting the letter of its aura, the letter is opened to a revolutionary style and content: “Naturally, when a letter cost half a crown to send, it had to prove itself a document of some importance; it was read aloud; it was tied up with green silk; after a certain number of years it was published for the infinite delectation of posterity” (182). However, Woolf much prefers John’s letter, which “will have to be burnt” and “only cost three-halfpence to send”; indeed, it is “a true letter” in its jumble and vivacity, and signals her rejection of the death-inducing onus of “posterity” (182-3).
taxis are dancing with the daffodils [...] to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist’s way, but condensed and synthesized in the poet’s way. (191)

Woolf returns to the argument she had made for her own work, and women’s artistic work generally, contra the previous generation. The material should not be hobbled by an aesthetic whole falsely imposed, nor by the paralysis of an over-bearing “I” shadowing the work; thus, she argues for the conditions that make possible a freedom of the mind to connect beyond the narrow round of the self. In reading the younger generation’s poems, Woolf hears a “bass of one word” expressing discontent, that is, her senses decrying the lack of “Beauty” (although she disavows responsibility for this bass note) (CE 2: 192).

Making a joke at her own expense in recalling *A Room of One’s Own* to critique this monotone—“but here I interrupted him [the voice of her senses]. For when it comes to saying that a poet should be bi-sexual, and that I think is what he was about to say, even I, who have had no scientific training whatsoever, draw the line and tell that voice to be silent” (CE 2: 192), Woolf nonetheless encourages these poets to reconsider what can be learnt from the “immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character” of the “art of writing” (CE 2: 184, 193). They have left out beauty (however unfashionable the word), have not made use of the senses nor of the rich complexity of the language—from antiquity to the modern street. Woolf’s concern is less to send the young men back to their books at Cambridge than to draw them into unexplored possibilities and, more importantly, to consider their audience. To succeed in the “art of writing,” Woolf argues,
one can learn by “reading,” but “much more drastically and effectively by imagining that one is not oneself but somebody different” (*CE* 2: 193).

The time and experience necessary to explore such perspectives, much less examine the self, perhaps explains Woolf’s much maligned admonishment: “And for heaven’s sake, publish nothing before you are thirty” (*CE* 2: 193). Rather than a glib remark from an older, well-published writer, Woolf grounds her observation in the facts of the market. She encourages the younger generation to write, “now that you are young, nonsense by the ream,” to learn their trade, but also warns “if you publish, your freedom will be checked; you will be thinking of what people will say; you will write for others when you ought only to be writing for yourself” (*CE* 2: 194). Woolf points out that publishing slim volumes of verses now would bring them no money, criticism is better had from friends than reviewers, and fame induces dullness, pomposity, and “prophetic airs”: “reflect that the greatest poets were anonymous” (*CE* 2: 194). Uneasily aware of the dangers of publication and fame, Woolf set anonymity as her mark to avoid the paralysis fame brings precisely at the period when she began to achieve it. In her personal reply to Lehmann’s letter which defends the “dressing up” of his generation, Woolf repeats her point, warning that it becomes a paralyzing habit and turns into posturing, in the “elderly” at least, citing the case of Wyndham Lewis. She defends her impression that, because of the market’s dependency on fashion, “the young poet is rather crudely jerked between realism and beauty” (qtd. in Lehmann 36).

Besides pulling the work askew by the influence of personality, dressing up is a form of obeisance to the market. In the “Letter” she notes the new context the poet enters: “For the first time in history there are readers—a large body of people,” of all
sorts of professions and classes, whom “the reviewers, the lecturers, the broadcasters—
must in all humanity make reading easy for.” They thus “assure [readers] that literature
is violent and exciting,” or take poses, such as, “The age of romance was over. The age
of realism had begun,” when reality—both the “reality” literature is to reflect and the
reality of the plurality of writers in any period—is quite different (CE 2: 184). Thus
poets “dress up”: “as it is of the utmost importance that readers should be amused, writers
acquiesce. They dress themselves up. They act their parts. One leads; the other follows”
(CE 2: 184). The only harm in the game is when “you begin to take yourself seriously as
a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-
conscious, biting, and scratching little animal” (CE 2: 184). While Woolf welcomes the
expansion of the corpus of readers, she decries the transformation of the art of writing
into mass, that is, homogenized, entertainment overseen and packaged by a class of
middlemen—reviewers, lecturers, broadcasters.

In analyzing the situation, Woolf admonishes herself as well, for her diaries reveal
these are the same tendencies she carefully records and sets out to avoid. In 1933, Woolf
complains of a grating effect from the reviews and comments that “Orlando Waves
Flush” receive, publicity that prevents her from being “full & calm & unconscious” as a
writer (D 4: 186). Ironically, Woolf seizes upon a writer’s pronouncement of her death
as an author (the reviewer argued that the popular success of Flush marks the “end of Mrs
Woolf as a live force”) as the backbone of her own restatement of principles as a writer:
“let me remember that fashion in literature is an inevitable thing; also that one must grow
& change; also that I have, at last laid hands upon my philosophy of anonymity” (D 4:
186). In her “Letter,” Woolf calls on the young poet not to pose and take up trends but
instead to think of “yourself rather as something much humbler and less spectacular, […] a poet in whom live all the poets of the past, from whom all the poets in time to come will spring […] an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character” (CE 2: 184). Her critique thus seems to belie a wish that the younger generation would take up her “revolutionary experiment” with poetry and prose and carry it on where she must leave off. If the younger generation’s rebuttal to her maxims came out of a sense of a lack of time in the turbulent political climate, of the need to speak now, then Woolf’s own struggle was fraught by a redoubled sense of this lack—the need to create works that would embody her vision and thus provide ground for “poets in time to come”—when she, too, found herself unsteady in a rocking world.

In her personal letter to Lehmann, Woolf’s lament is that the “spasmodic, jerky, self-conscious effect of [the author’s] realistic language” when he attempts to “swallow Mrs Gape” (that is, another version of Mrs. Brown, Woolf’s test case of the working or middle class figure for the novelist) comes from the writer’s failure to “believe in her,” and perhaps in himself; rather than reaching “the unconscious, automatic state” that assimilates the other, the poet is self-consciously aware of his task and the trends (36).19

19 Woolf uses similar language in her diary, recording her thoughts on reading Spender’s The Destructive Element, 20 April 1935. Woolf praises its initial “swing & fluency” but laments its petering “out in the usual litter of an undergraduate table”; nonetheless, the text leads her to a rigorous critique of her own work: “why do I always fight shy of my contemporaries? What is really the woman’s angle? […] I recognise my own limitations: not a good ratiocinator, Lytton used to say. Do I instinctively keep my mind from analysing, which would impede its creativeness? […] No creative writer can swallow another contemporary” (D 4: 303). The entry continues, noting Leonard’s discussion of the “scares” flowing in from the public world, annotating world events, and then drawing back to conclude: “there are incessant conversations—Mussolini, Hitler, Macdonald. All these people incessantly arriving at Croydon, arriving at Berlin, Moscow, Rome; & flying off again—while Stephen & I think how to improve the world” (D 4: 303). Woolf’s distance from Spender is one of age and experience as a writer (the
Woolf’s concern is that the younger generation will not improve upon the gains made by her own generation’s decade-long battle with “Modern Fiction,” of connecting the poetry and the prose, of connecting with and continuing the long spiral of literature. This fear underlies Woolf’s fundamental belief in the power and importance of art, yet it is this belief that is being simultaneously shaken. The ambivalence of Woolf’s 1930s arguments reveals a growing sense of the inadequacy of their work in progressing a culture of humanity against the long spiral of patriarchal wars. It is perhaps the threat of personality, self-consciousness, the defensive “spasmodic” need not to “believe” too deeply or abandon one’s group identity—characteristics that enabled the rise of fascism according to *Three Guineas*—that led Woolf to focus even more in her subsequent works on effacing her own personality. If her generation of high modernists had been a source of this younger generation’s difficulties (self-consciousness, posturing either in choosing a political ideology or a style), then rather than shutting herself up either in a tower or clamping down her shell, Woolf would invite the younger generation onto center stage in her works, provided, however, that they recognize themselves as taking part in a much longer and expansive pageant than the present moment.

### 6.4 The Revolutionary Work of “The Leaning Tower”

For the younger generation’s part, the European crises of the present moment made such an expansive vision impracticable. Lehmann writes of his travels in Central Europe with Isherwood and Spender which led him to want “to be present as a poet in the undergraduate’s table) and also one of sex (the woman’s angle is the Outsider’s); nonetheless, she sees him fundamentally as an ally.
vortex of a coming storm” (37). In April 1938, when Lehmann returned to the Hogarth Press, officially buying out Virginia’s share, she wrote him of her “sanguinity about the future” and relief to “lift the burden on to your back” (qtd. in Lehmann 38). Indeed, Woolf’s invitation to Lehmann to a celebratory dinner suggests an awareness that her legacy as one poet among the many since antiquity would exist primarily as a haunting presence: she asks him “to be the guest of Virginia Woolf’s ghost—the Hogarth ghost: who rises let us hope elsewhere” (qtd. in Lehmann 38-9). When war did come to London, Woolf’s reactions were telling—a vacillation between despair linked to the sense of being unable to gain a perspective and an “exhilaration” associated with her sense of enduring, a continuity intensified with her reading of “Coleridge,” “the ancients,” and “William Morris, Chants for Socialists” (qtd. in Lehmann 42). During this period, she was attempting to assimilate the experience of the present moment, a horror that shut down all horizons, into a vision that was expansive, the “beauty” of lyric vision. The result, critics have argued, was that her last novel, *Between the Acts*, is itself maimed by the difficulties she’d identified in “A Letter to a Young Poet”: “I am left with broken parts in my hands” (*CE* 2: 187).

Nevertheless, it is Lehmann, her young poet, who rises and speaks for “Virginia’s ghost” in recalling his impressions of reading the novel’s typescript:

> the book had a quite shattering and absolutely original imaginative power, pushing her poetry—I have to call it poetry—to the extreme limits of the communicable. It was obviously in some ways unfinished, but I was deeply moved, disturbed, thrilled in the face of a revolutionary work of art. (44; emphasis added)

It is perhaps its literal but also its deliberately “unfinished” quality that enables the work to fulfill Woolf’s vision, as subsequent generations are compelled to take up and add their
voice to the large body of writing surrounding the work. In 1944, Lehmann wrote in a French literary review of the mistake of dismissing Woolf’s death and her final novel as the product of either madness or the inability to face reality in the form of bombs:

> It was not the war which brought Virginia Woolf to the tragedy which ended her life. . . . No, it was the strain of the task she had set herself, the dread of the fine instrument, which had created so many wonderful things already, breaking under the pressure of this last, heroic attempt. (45)

Although I do not believe Woolf’s suicide is attributable to the heroic attempt of writing *Between the Acts* as her diary entries during the period of writing are consistently positive, Lehmann’s statement is telling in the younger generation’s response to Woolf.20 That such testimony should come from Lehmann, a poet who had received such a thorough critique in essays book-ending their relationship, underscores Woolf’s ability and success in making her reader-successors aware of her investment, belief in, and need for their collaboration. If authors today speak irritably of being haunted by Woolf’s ghost (in the very language she set down in “The Angel in the House”), it has proven a fruitful haunting nonetheless.

> It is Woolf’s increasing move toward anonymity and her elevation of the reader as creator that created the “pressure” as well as the lasting value of “this last heroic attempt.” This anonymity, coupled not with her ideal of immunity but with a willingness to become vulnerable on the “common ground,” also marks her difference from other

---

20 The range of readers touched by Woolf’s work, particularly *Between the Acts*, is strikingly captured in Sybil Oldfield’s *Afterwords: Letters on the Death of Virginia Woolf*. At the period of Woolf’s death, Bloomsbury and Woolf were under attack by the Leavises group and *Scrutiny* writers, as well as editorials in *The Times* such as “The Eclipse of the Highbrow” (Oldfield xvi). Spender was one of the louder voices in the counterattack. May Sarton wrote in her condolence letter to Leonard, “There must be many young writers like me who felt when she died that now there was noone who mattered, noone whose opinion counted one way or another, who felt suddenly absolutely abandoned and alone” (Oldfield 26).
more prolific poets of the war period, such as H.D. and T.S. Eliot who discovered an immunity amidst the bombing that proved profoundly productive for each. In “The Leaning Tower,” a paper originally read to the Workers’ Educational Association at Brighton, on April 27, 1940, and published with Lehmann’s encouragement, Woolf addresses the difficulty of poets in the present. Unlike the nineteenth century, when war “did not affect either the writer or his vision of human life” and when “the influence of peace” enabled “a very prolific, creative, rich century,” poets in the twentieth century are denied Wordsworth’s recollection in tranquility, the necessary “unconscious” state that enables the poet to “create” (CE 2: 164-66). In Woolf’s analysis, 1914 meant a blow to the “tower,” the privileges attendant to the educated class that allowed them to become writers; however, having had the experience of a prewar tranquility, they could continue to write “as if the tower were firm beneath them” (170). The next generation of writers who began in 1925 “are tower dwellers like their predecessors,” but their view from that tower proved incredibly different: “Everywhere change; everywhere revolution,” they stood in “leaning towers. The books were written under the influence of change, under the threat of war” (170). Woolf again imagines herself in the younger generation’s place, taking her working-class audience along: “Let us imagine, to bring this home to us, that we are actually upon a leaning tower,” notes the poets’ emotions and tendencies, but then

21 Cuddy-Keane offers an assiduous rhetorical reading of “The Leaning Tower,” particularly Woolf’s strategies for dethroning the writer’s “I” at the opening of the text to finally urge “the audience to become participants—” so that the “I” becomes the “we” (Public Sphere 98). “Far from espousing an aesthetic ideology, Woolf’s essay concerns the cultural value of poetic discourse and asserts that writing is cultural work. Her object is the political liberation of both the working-class voice and of the undermind, both in her time suppressed and disempowered” (103).
marks the slight difference of their positions, a perspective made different by Woolf’s sex and her audience’s class, “But we are not in their position; we have not had eleven years of expensive education. We have only been climbing an imaginary tower” (171).

Despite readings of the essay as Woolf’s condemnation of this generation, her sympathy with their ambivalent emotions is clear; inhabiting their standpoint and imagining their grievances echoes her own argument in *Three Guineas*:

The tower they realized was founded upon injustice and tyranny; it was wrong for a small class to possess an education that other people paid for; wrong to stand upon the gold that a bourgeois father had made from his bourgeois profession. It was wrong; yet how could they make it right? (172)

The difference, Woolf implies, is that whereas the younger generation sits “trapped” at the top of their leaning tower and thus their poems are “full of discord and bitterness, full of confusion and of compromise,” she sits at the top of her leaning tower reveling in its potential destruction, an outsider without rights to the property, balancing discord with the possibility of unity on a common ground in her prose, refusing compromise as well as didacticism in her art (172). As these young poets practice “oratory, not poetry. […] We are in a group, in a class-room as we listen,” Woolf longs for the intimacy of Wordsworth’s poetry, “[w]e listen to that when we are alone. We remember that in solitude” (176). It is not the fault of the poets, but the forces of the 1930s that force the poet “to be a politician” and “a scapegoat,” caught between “two worlds, one dying, the other struggling to be born” while they desire above all “no longer to be isolated and exalted […], but to be down on the ground with the mass of human kind” (176).22 Woolf

---

22 Typical of her attention to a history of lyric voices during this period, Woolf quotes Matthew Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” in which the poet is “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born” (1352).
concludes her analysis with the great merits of the “leaning-tower writers”: although limited by their self-consciousness, they nonetheless “wrote about themselves honestly, therefore creatively,” and “with help from Dr. Freud” have taken “the first step towards telling the truth about other people” (177-78).²³

Woolf has hope for “the next generation,” asking whether it must also “be a leaning-tower generation […] with a foot in two worlds? Or will there be no more towers and no more classes and shall we stand, without hedges between us, on the common ground?” (178). Woolf’s cautious optimism contrasts with H.D.’s wartime epic poem Trilogy which in many ways places its hope in the continuation of the poet as “the scribe,” part of a secret and spiritual band stretching to antiquity, now reemerging to subvert the sword. In H.D.’s novel The Gift, however, the egalitarian nature of “the gift” echoes Woolf’s vision in “The Leaning Tower.” If the politicians’ speeches since September 1939 should come true, if a “new order” of “equal opportunities” is achieved and the “burden of didacticism, of propaganda” is made irrelevant because of a shared “common belief,” then Woolf predicts for the next generation the end of the novel and “a stronger, a more varied literature in the classless and towerless society of the future” (178-79).²⁴ In order to “bridge the gulf between the two worlds,” meaning the world of the working-classes and the leaning-tower world, as well as the wartime world and the

²³ In telegraphically recording in her diary her meeting with Freud, Woolf noted, “Dr. Freud gave me a narcissus. […] We like patients on chairs. […] On Hilter. Generation before the poison will be worked out […]. Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering. When we left he took up the stand What are you going to do? The English—war” (D 5: 202).

²⁴ See Cuddy-Keane’s analysis for the reception of both the listening audience and middle class writers to Woolf’s call. In her letters and diary, Woolf expresses her exasperation at her “failure to elicit the response she desired,” that is, her audience refused to argue, to question, but would only “stare and stick” (100). Cuddy-Keane writes, “As ‘betwixt and betweens,’ they were not yet the new classless society; they were the victims of the inhibiting middlebrow” (101).
possible postwar classless world, Woolf pins her final argument on behalf of literature: “We have got to teach ourselves to understand literature” (180). Literature becomes a means to bridge the gulf and requires common readers to become active participants: “in future we are not going to leave writing to be done for us by a small class of well-to-do young men who have only a pinch, a thimbleful of experience to give us. We are going to add our own experience, to make our contribution” (181). Readers—“are we not commoners, outsiders?”—must become writers, must critically compare their writing, and must “trespass at once. Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there” (181). In Woolf’s vision, it is by entering together into the work of literature that a common understanding can be created and peace achieved. The dialectical work of literature—reading and writing, preserving and creating—will be the bridge to “cross the gulf” and survive the war, and must be taken up by all (181).

6.5 The Cinema and the Classes

I will return to Woolf’s vision in the next chapter to discuss how Between the Acts and its montage technique stages aspects of this vision, but here I turn to H.D.’s ventures in the 1930s in order to then examine how they inform montage in The Gift. Woolf’s praise of one aspect of the leaning-tower writers describes a quality which enabled H.D., after a decade of blockage that nonetheless fed her creative development, to enter a period of incredible productivity during the war. Woolf writes that these leaning-tower writers may provide a new method with “great value in the future,” in that “[t]hey have been great egotists. That too was forced upon them by their circumstances. When
everything is rocking round one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself” (177). As I shall argue, it is H.D.’s skillful egotism, the ability to discover and perform in her writing a comparatively stable creative self, that enabled her to create participatory, enduring works of art during the war. H.D.’s experiences in cinema and psychoanalysis in the 1930s were essential in preparing for these works. At the end of the 1920s, whereas her contemporaries incorporated aspects of cinema and psychology into their poetry or prose as a way to vitalize their technique, H.D. went further in turning directly to the source.

In the late twenties, H.D. became increasingly involved with the POOL film group, an avant-garde production company established by Bryher and based in Territet, Switzerland; the POOL group also published the cinema journal Close Up, edited by Kenneth Macpherson (and silently by Bryher) between 1927 and 1933. The journal sought to educate audiences, particularly the avant-garde-averse British public, about the scope of the new art form and the possibilities blocked by narrative Hollywood cinema. As Anne Friedberg argues in “Reading Close Up 1927-1933,” the journal demonstrates how the avant-garde cinema at this turning point “grasped for its potentials, feared for its foreclosures—transformed the very fabric of psychic, gendered and racialized experience, and explored—against cinema’s commercial domination—the radical possibilities of film as a new medium of aesthetic expression” (CU 7).25 For Close Up,

25 James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus are the editors of the anthology Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism. Donald locates the journal’s discourse in the context of various film theories and aesthetics then evolving and also examines contributions that comment on the transition to the sound film. Marcus prefaces “The Contributions of H.D.” as well as “Continuous Performance: Dorothy Richardson,” and discusses the importance of psychoanalysis to the journal. Friedberg introduces the collection as well as a chapter specifically on Borderline.
H.D. wrote two poems titled “Projector” as well as eleven film reviews, unconventional in their lyric departures that focus on the author’s experience of the film. The journal rejected consensus in favor of productive argument on a variety of topics pertaining to cinema’s potential—psychology, youth and education, economics and technology, censorship, exhibition networks of ciné-clubs, race relations, the relationship of aesthetics and politics. The diverse contributors included, among many others, Soviet directors Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, psychologists Hanns Sachs and Barbara Low, and writers Dorothy Richardson and Gertrude Stein. Quoting Benjamin, who began his *Arcades Project* in 1927 as well, Friedberg calls “the body of writing in *Close Up*” its “own form of ‘literary montage’” (*CU 3*).

The POOL group films were a practical extension of the theories and debates discursively staged in the journal’s pages. In a 1929 advertisement for the journal, the editors predicted that volumes of the journal “will be undoubtedly of the greatest value as reference books for the future as well as for the present” in documenting “cinematographic development” (*CU 4*). From the vantage of the “future,” it is telling that the POOL films project broke up shortly after the production of *Borderline* in 1930, and that *Close Up* ceased publication in 1933. The years 1930 to 1933 marked the sharp decline of avant-garde cinematic development due in large part to the commercial dominance attained by the ascendancy of the sound film.\(^{26}\) The cover of the October

---

\(^{26}\) Kristin Thompson has drawn attention to how recent events (in film and politics) have paralleled those of the 1920s and 1930s. Thompson’s “The Rise and Fall of Film Europe” examines the tentative success of a “Film Europe movement” between 1924 and 1929, focusing on Russian, French, and German relations, and the factors that led to decline after 1929, primarily the sound film securing Hollywood’s lock on the European market and the resurgence of nationalism among European nations in the face of economic depression (56).
1927 issue of *Close Up* describes the journal as the first “English review [...] to approach films from the angles of art, experiment, and possibility,” and it is precisely these three avenues that the economic and political changes of the 1930s closed.

Although publishing in English and hoping to create a British audience for the avant-garde, the contributors to *Close Up* and the POOL films aspired to internationalism. They sought to bring to British and American audiences the innovations of Russian, German, Italian, and French films and the avant-garde discussions already taking place in foreign cinema journals. In addition to enriching the techniques and scope of English films, they believed that such an exchange could dismantle nationalist prejudices and work toward mutual understanding among different cultures. They shared Woolf’s vision of an art in which borders and nations would be deposed as “we” meet in the poetic revelation of our plurality and the prosaic reality of the common ground of a shared humanity. However, the arrival of the sound film and its incredible expense shut down smaller production companies, thus facilitating the dominance of narrative Hollywood cinema. As the ideal of a pluralist art form foundered, *Close Up* fought against both the censorship imposed by conventional narrative expectations and official government censorship. During this effort, *Close Up*

27 Andrew Higson’s and Richard Moltby’s volume “*Film Europe*” and “*Film America*”: Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939 charts the emergence of “the ideal of a vibrant pan-European cinema industry” that could challenge the hegemony of American distributors (2). This international ideal emerged in the 1920s in tandem with the League of Nations and a Union of European States. Nonetheless, “despite the best efforts of the trade and, for a time, of the League of Nations, Film Europe never acquired the ‘highly organized, well-financed, fighting machine’ that might have allowed it to assume” the ideal form advanced by its advocates (4).

28 Ralph Bond’s report in *Close Up* on the “storm” between the London City Council and the London Workers’ Film Society regarding their attempts to secure a license to privately exhibit
printed the London City Council’s infamous rejection slip of Dulac’s *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. The POOL group film *Borderline* was able to be screened by film societies in Britain; however, United States customs impounded the film. By the June 1933 issue of *Close Up*, their concern to subvert acts of censorship (detailed in Ralph Bond’s “Acts Under the Acts”) had been displaced. Bryher’s article “What Shall You Do in the War?” only glances at film in its urgent argument that the public must awaken to the coming war, to recognize that the possibility of peace would soon be missed if it was not fought for now.\(^\text{29}\) For Bryher, the developments of “film societies and small experiments” of the last five years had become symbolic of the potential of “intellectual liberty” across borders. Film had shown Bryher that each person holds the other’s future in his or her hands, and she calls upon readers to fight for their hard won intellectual liberty, the alternative being a plunge into unimaginable “barbarism” (*CU* 309).

Germaine Dulac’s writing on newsreels track a similar trajectory from the ideal potential of cinema to the disillusionment resulting from totalitarian uses of cinema. In 1934, Dulac wrote “The educational and social effect of Newsreels,”\(^\text{30}\) arguing that the social significance of newsreels and its achievement of the true “spirit of cinema” lies in their “registering real life without commentary, in its various distinctive movement” (2). It is important to stress that Dulac refers here to the kinds of *faits divers* she devised in uncensored films—particularly *Potemkin*, *Storm over Asia*, *Mother*, and *Modern Babylon*—and the Board of Censors’ successful censorship campaign appeared in April 1930.

\(^{29}\) Friedman calls the article “a prescient call to arms, an attack on progressive pacifism and a fascinating foil to what H.D. would write about the role of the artist in the murderous times in *Tribute to Freud* and *Trilogy*, as well as to Virginia Woolf’s later defense of pacifism in *Three Guineas*” (*AF* 357).

\(^{30}\) Siân Reynolds has translated and published three of Dulac’s articles on newsreels.
the newsreels of France-Actualités, which were markedly different from others in the genre in their focus on seemingly incidental moments, their “musical and ‘visualist’ tendencies,” and lack of didactic commentary (Reynolds 75). According to Dulac, “marginal” newsreels, free from the commercial constraints of the need for spectacle and censorship, “bring out the universally human” (2). Dulac argues that such newsreels bring together people of “the most diverse intelligences, the most varied races” and reveal, in “intimate details” the human life of other nations and traditions (3). Doing away with “intermediaries,” the montage of the cinema newsreel “brings understanding” by allowing one to live, rather than imagine, the experience of another across class, race, and national lines, and thus “it helps to destroy hostility” (3). In circumventing the newspaper report, the literary essay, the distances of other public spheres which create aura, the “precision of the camera brings the clarity of truth,” replacing the “vagueness of speeches” of public figures with a familiarity that may breed understanding (3). Dulac concludes with an utopian idealism echoed in the internationalist impulse of Close Up:

Thanks to newsreels, we can enter into diplomatic discussions, into quarrels or alliances between peoples, and we can learn about their society. We see people in their home surroundings, and through insignificant remarks or actions which have nothing to do with the big issues, but which can create certain human contacts, we draw closer to them. Whether intentionally or not, ideas circulate via newsreels and become more human, less abstract and elitist. By bringing a greater awareness of the rest of the world, the newsreel makes it possible to reveal the general characteristics of humanity, and individual feelings. (3-4)

31 In “Germaine Dulac and French Documentary Film Making in the 1930s,” Reynolds quotes critics’ reactions to Dulac’s newsreels: “She seems to want to give her newsreel a musical and ‘visualist’ tendency, which we cannot fully appreciate,” October 1932 (75). One critic finds the company’s concentration “on tiny events, never the great ones” curious given its “intelligent cameramen and editors” (75). Another critic appreciates its non-didactic commentary: “No superfluous commentary: the spectator has to work out the philosophy from what he sees on screen” (75). According to Dulac, such newsreels, montages of “short and varied elements” that are “linked together to form a kind of magazine” encompass every subject, “national and international events, political, legal, scientific or artistic” (75).
As a marginal note that Dulac appended to “Newsreels in the Service of History” would observe, this ideal humanist vision was only possible in the early 1930s, when newsreels circulated freely; in the years before the war, they would become propaganda and each possibility envisioned above reversed.32

H.D.’s participation in cinema took place during the years when the political and aesthetic potential of the art toward such ideals had not yet foundered. H.D. starred in, and helped edit with Bryher, the film *Borderline* (1930). Directed by Kenneth Macpherson, this silent film (a vexed choice to many critics given its year and cast) is the first and last feature-length film the POOL group produced. The film portrays the complex psychology of individuals involved in an interracial love triangle in a “small ‘borderline’ town, anywhere in Europe” (*CU* 218), starring H.D., Bryher, and Paul and Eslanda Robeson.33 *Borderline* marks a key moment in aesthetics and politics for modernist cinema. First, the film’s narrative addresses both racial and homosexual

---

32 Dulac wrote in the margins of her proposed chapter “Cinema at the Service of History”:
This text was written a few years before the war, at a time when newsreels in the cinema were allowed to circulate freely. Since 1939 things have changed. Newsreels in every country now mislead their public by omission, since no belligerent power has any wish to show the public images filmed by the enemy. Cinema newsreels, which for all the authenticity of their images have rarely been entirely objective [in presentation], have now become one of the most developed and important branches of propaganda. (6)

33 *Borderline*’s simple and elliptical structure suggest a lyric narrative form. According to “The Story” in the film’s “libretto” (a pamphlet written by H.D.), Adah, a “mulatto woman,” (Eslanda Robeson) is “staying in rooms” as are a white couple, Thorne (Gavin Arthur) and Astrid (H.D.). According to the program notes, Adah has become “involved in an affair” with Thorne, and is unaware that her husband Pete (Paul Robeson) is working in town, staying at a hotel-café run by the gender-ambiguous “Manageress” (Bryher). When a quarrel between Astrid and Thorne results in Astrid’s death, “[t]he negro woman is blamed … Thorne is acquitted,” and Pete is ordered to leave town by the mayor, made “a scapegoat for unresolved problems, evasions and neuroses for which the racial ‘borderline’ has served justification” (*CU* 218).
prejudice. H.D. performs the role of the neurotic and racist Astrid; in her acting, she projects a character for her audience to critique as she had via Raymonde Ransome’s anti-Semitic romanticism and scapegoating of Ermy Solomon in *Palimpsest*. Second, the radical form of the film is shaped by the possibilities of the new technology, new theories of psychology, and a new theorization of the political reach of surrealist art. Friedberg writes, “the film emerged out of an unprecedented liaison between cinematic and psychoanalytic theory: the alliance of Hanns Sachs’s Freud-driven theories of the figurational processes of the unconscious and Eisenstein’s theories of intellectual montage” (*CU* 218). Third, the POOL film group aspired to a “new beginning” for cinematography, integrating techniques of music and modernist literature, and blurring not only the borders between genres but also the borders between aesthetics and politics.

Macpherson’s “As Is,” a regular feature of *Close Up*, traces the influence of Eisenstein’s theory on the POOL group. In creating a “clatter montage”34 effect in the film, Macpherson took up Eisenstein’s “overtonal montage” and theorization of a “higher category” of montage, one with “overtones of an intellectual order” (*CU* 219-20). As Macpherson’s *Close Up* articles make clear, his directing and meticulous story-boarding of the film were influenced by both Eisenstein and Sachs (Friedberg, *CU* 220). Yet this synthesis in method cannot be attributed to Macpherson alone: it is Bryher who campaigned on behalf of Eisenstein, as well as Russian and German films generally, and H.D. who pushed Macpherson, as well as Bryher, toward psychoanalytic theory. H.D.’s use of the palimpsest as a model for her prose work, as well as her early imagist poetry,

---

34 Eisenstein coined “clatter montage” in “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” April 1929.
should also be recognized as an influence. In the *Borderline* pamphlet, H.D. writes that “clatter montage” is an effect almost “of super-imposition but subtly differing from it … achieved by the meticulous cutting of three and four and five inch lengths of film and pasting these tiny strips together,” a task which she shared with Bryher when Macpherson fell ill during editing (CU 220, 334), and a practice that becomes a key motif of *The Gift*. The pamphlet makes explicit the POOL group’s intent to dissect the matrix of borderlines that constructed identity in their culture—race, sexuality, gender, class, and nationality—in order to expose the effects of overt oppression and more subtle internalized self-suppression.35 The technique of clatter montage, and the lyric interludes that are juxtaposed with traumatic violence in the film, are suggestive of H.D.’s narrative techniques in both *Palimpsest* and *The Gift*, texts that also aim to illuminate aspects of this matrix.

H.D.’s contributions to *Close Up* are also evocative of her fiction, utilizing a kind of interior monologue style in exploring a subject—whether a particular film or the conception of beauty.36 In “Russian Films,” published September 1928, H.D. begins by

35 A special issue of the August 1929 edition of *Close Up* addresses the “Negro Viewpoint.” Editorials by Macpherson, Robert Herring, and Dorothy Richardson straddle a borderline of penetrating critiques of racism on the one side, and, on the other, the Anglo-modernist tendency to project primitivism onto the racial other, romanticizing the other as a subversive power to escape the stagnation and neurosis of the white bourgeois. H.D.’s portrayal of the white artist’s interest in the racial and ethnic other (Jews, African and Native Americans) projects this tendency in an attempt to dissect it. Jean Walton discusses this matrix in analyzing the relationship of Paul Robeson and H.D. in *Borderline* in “White Neurotics, Black Primitives, and the Queer Matrix of *Borderline*.“ Maggie Humm also provides a nuanced analysis of the unevenness of Macpherson’s anti-racist aims in *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*.

36 Laura Marcus notes that “H.D.’s approach to the cinematic is in many ways idiosyncratic, to be understood as an aspect of her broader concerns with language and symbol, psychoanalysis, mysticism and spiritualism, classicism and the celebration of women’s beauty and power” (CU 98).
identifying herself as a fellow amateur who has been assigned this topic by her editor. Characteristically, H.D. identifies herself with a kind of common viewer, yet goes on to differentiate her viewpoint, an ideal common viewer, from that of the commodified spectator. As the former, she demonstrates how being an active viewer stimulated by an engaged art leads to questions, critique, and dialogue. In “Russian Films,” H.D. links our need for Russian films with the need for spiritual sustenance (the films are likened to the Old and New Testament), and she views the “stirring” of the mind by this avant-garde film world as a potential modern counterpart to the Italian Renaissance. Nonetheless, Russian films are unlikely to be seen as a result of the film industry’s obeisance to “small town provincial box offices” which demand “thick-ear stuff,” “laudanum in bottles and raw spirits” instead of the wine of “intellectual sustenance” (CU 135). H.D. questions whether the public truly demands this somnolent type of popular film, since they have been fed only “pernicious dopes” and not tasted the alternatives (135). Rather than arguing for the preservation of an elite (although she tacitly locates herself there, thus undermining her opening gesture), H.D. chastises the failure of those in towers of privilege who have been able to view these alternatives for not sharing access to the “goods”: it is “a duty of the educated classes and the connoisseur, the privileged classes in all countries, to see that the great art productions of each country are made generally accessible, as it was at one time the fiery mission of certain in office to translate the Bible” (135).

H.D.’s tone in assessing the tower of privilege differs here from Woolf’s. Her appeal to the privileged to make their art part of the common goods is predicated not so much on the destruction of the tower, as it is on the stratagem of offering the privileged a
further garland, that of the priest or scribe that translates the sacred art. Nonetheless, H.D. shares with Woolf a utopian vision of art enabling the dismantling of nationalist prejudices. One reason Russian films are not commonly shown is English pride and fear. H.D. counters, “We are no longer nations. We are or should be a nation,” following the “so-called Great War,” our lesson should be to “[s]ay I am my brother’s keeper. […] For if one suffers, eventually the other must, and if one nation to-day befouls its own integrity and strikes blindly at a lesser nation, the whole world, willy (as they say) nilly must be sooner or later dragged into the fray,” rather than fighting blindly, “let us know what it is about, nations must understand each other” (136). As for Dulac, for H.D. the all-encompassing camera’s eye seems to offer this bridge to understanding. H.D. argues for a democratization of the new art that would challenge the aura of the burgeoning Hollywood star system, asking for an English film “of the people for the people, and […] BY the people” (138). Russian films have “taught us that every man, every woman and every child is a ‘star’. We are all ‘stars’. […] The Russian has taught us that life and art are in no way to be severed and that people to be actors must first and last be people” (138). Nonetheless, her analysis does set up a special role for the privileged classes in translating their goods into common goods; it is only in The Gift that H.D. is able to effectively reveal “that life and art are in no way to be severed,” and that indeed “every woman and every child is a ‘star’.”

In a series of three articles under the title “The Cinema and the Classics,” H.D. describes the class issue in terms that more closely parallel Woolf’s analysis of the leaning-tower writers and the common ground. Here, H.D. clarifies her location between two worlds: H.D. refers to the small class of “leaven”—who makes up the valiant
“advance guard” and includes the “fair-to-middling intellectual” like herself—and “the lump,” with whom she and the “leaven” are in a symbiotic relationship (CU 105). The leaven, “sometimes curious as to the lump’s point of view, for all the lump itself so grandiloquently ignores it,” wonders why the lump will not “be leavened just a little quicker” for the sake of its own good, happiness, and beauty (105). “Wedged securely in the lump (we won’t class ourselves as sniffingly above it),” H.D. asks why cinema should remain so formulaic and banal (105). Given that both lump and leaven desire “beauty,” H.D. imputes to every intellectual the chivalric duty of rescuing cinema, this chained maiden, from the “the Ogre, the Censor” (107), taking up a trope Dulac had also used in her arguments on behalf of avant-garde cinema. H.D. also echoes Dulac in calling for a revaluation that might create the “classic” in cinema. Speaking as an audience member, H.D. rejects the overwrought excesses of “cinema rote” that cause her to lose her self, “become sated and lost and tired” in the “tangle of exciting detail” and effects (110-11). Like Woolf, she finds that submergence in spectacle lulls the mind into somnolence, and she wishes to get beyond the surface detail and narrative suture. Like Dulac, she laments the collective failure to recognize the technical and “poetic” potential of the medium and recognizes that the audience is key in changing this status quo. H.D.’s conclusion is similar to Woolf’s in “The Leaning Tower” with its invocation to the “we” who must enter into the common work of literature, as many readers who write and talk back rather than accepting passively a canon of the few. H.D. finally argues, “You and I have got to work,” since “A perfect medium has at last been granted us” and this medium of light and
movement should not be made “a slave and a commonplace mountebank” due to recourse to “preconceived ideas” (112-13).37

In the last installment of a three-part series titled “The Mask and the Movietone,” H.D. turns to the “immense possibilities of the Movietone in certain circumstances” (CU 117). Given her subsequent description of newsreel items, she is likely referring to Fox Movietone News which had released the first sound news films the previous month (October 1927). If “[t]he cinema has become to us what the church was to our ancestors,” then H.D. envisions the power of the newsreel to create “international understanding” (117). However, unlike Dulac, H.D. simultaneously undercuts as improbable each vision of this ideal, which paradoxically allows her to expand this ideal vision further: “If we could not sit up nights hating Englishmen or Frenchmen or Italians or Spaniards or American (or Americans) where, where would all our energy and our spirit flow to? I mean where would we get to? We would be, like pre-Periclean Athenians, I fear, really ready for an Art Age” (117). In H.D.’s formulation, the intimacy of the Movietone (that is, the “practical” Movietone, rather than that of “pure sentiment”) engenders understanding: “Nations are in turns of wrists, in intonations of voices” (117). It also engenders communal laughter:

The Germans, we are told, are delighted and rock with mirth at the screen aspect of the French president. Well, let us […] laugh at one another. Laughter precludes a sort of affectionate acceptance. Let us laugh but let it be in temples, in gatherings, the group consciousness is at the mercy of the Screen and Movietone. (118)

37 Ironically, H.D.’s call for “restraint” (the subtitle of this article) in films, for someone to “slash and cut” the sentimental and spectacular excess of cinema, should have been perhaps applied to her own reviews in Close Up, which tend to layer metaphors, restate successively, and lack the reshaping that the “stream of consciousness” undergoes in her fiction.
H.D.’s Athenian “Divinity” is “Mind and Peace and Power and Understanding,” and she finds its “weapon” in the Movietone applied to “questions of education and international politics” (118). In achieving understanding and thus peace, art and beauty become possible: “a new world is open, a new world of political understanding, of educational reform, of art (in its pure sense) even” (118).

Yet (of course), H.D. discerns a fear in realizing these potentials of the Movietone; its “mechanical perfection” unmasks a reality that cannot be worshipped or experienced as balm, threatening the very magic and mystery of the “half light” of “our old ideals and treasures” (120). Indeed, H.D.’s ironic skepticism—meant to encourage viewers to cast away the old ideals—foresaw the more likely reality than the ideal; audiences preferred the sentiment and spectacle of narrative Hollywood cinema and either the didactic or “light” newsreels to the alternative she propose. Her claim, “[l]ike a moth really we are paralysed before too much reality,” foretells the claim of T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” written in the half-light before the war. With the leaves of a tree full of children’s laughter, a bird tells Eliot’s speaker to go, “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (1.44-5), and it is echoed as well near the conclusion of the pageant Between the Acts when the producer La Trobe finds the effect of “present-time reality” “too strong” for her audience (179). The ideals of Close Up—particularly, the fostering of a broad range of independent film productions (film as a poetic art, as education, as psychoanalytic exploration, as narrative in a medium of light and movement) as well as the fostering of a network for disseminating and showing such films across classes (via the London Film Society and the Workers’ Film Movement)—were foreclosed by the
realities of the depression and the coming war combined with the novelty of the sound film. In their 1930s essays, H.D., Woolf, and Dulac each argue on behalf of an art that would enable understanding across nations and classes, and on behalf of a classless, diverse audience whose engagement with that art would create a climate of peace and pluralism thus facilitating an age of democratized “art and beauty.” However, their appeals are made precisely at a time when art, and particularly film, would soon be absorbed into the closed-circuits of consumption—state propaganda and Hollywood escapism.

6.6 H.D. Between Generations

H.D. moved on from *Close Up* and direct participation in films not only as a result of the dissolution of the POOL group, but also out of a sense that another discipline would be necessary to face the same forces that made the reemergence of an “Art age” impossible. As Laura Marcus has noted, H.D.’s search for a “universal language” in film is closely related to her interest in psychoanalysis and the universal language of dreams (*CU* 102). I do not want to suggest H.D.’s interests progressed in a step-by-step chronology, however. In *Palimpsest*, H.D. already turns to the cinema and psychoanalysis in depicting her poet-protagonist’s search for universal ethical laws in aesthetics. H.D. did not abandon cinema for psychoanalysis, but found in both disciplines the technologies, models, and ideas that supported her own vision of lyric narrative prose work. Marcus points out that H.D. “shared Robert Herring’s fascination with the cinema as magic” and was attracted to Eisenstein’s “intellectual montage” and Japanese hieroglyph images (*CU* 99). Indeed, H.D. frequently employs Eisenstein’s
concept of the “fourth dimension” outlined in the Close Up translation of “The Fourth Dimension of the Kino,” in her personal writing, letters, and in Tribute to Freud (Chisholm 98). For H.D., both cinema and psychoanalysis centered on the image (reinvested with magic) and interpretation undertaken with others (suggestive of a new religion), offered alternatives to linear chronology (intellectual montage, memory), and proposed ways of seeing that would undermine if not demolish iniquitous borders based on nationalism and hierarchies of race, sex, and class.

H.D. took up the ideas of seminal figures of cinema and psychoanalysis—Eisenstein and Freud—not with an attitude of worshipful submissiveness, but with a sense of contributing to a creative interplay. H.D. wrote to Bryher a month after beginning her analysis with Freud in March 1933, “we are having a most luscious sort of vers-libre relationship” (AF 165). Although earlier analyses of H.D.’s relationship to Freud tend to depict the latter as a prescriptive patriarch, Susan Stanford Friedman’s analysis of H.D.’s letters during the early and mid-thirties and Claire Buck’s nuanced reading of H.D.’s use of psychoanalysis to locate “a psychic field of reality in which art can have effect” (76) reveal the more complex interplay of their relationship. Similarly, regarding H.D.’s use of Eisenstein’s ideas, it is necessary to distinguish between his

38 In Tribute to Freud, H.D. writes, “The actuality of the present, its bearing on the past, their bearing on the future. Past, present, future, these three—but there is another time-element, popularly called the fourth-dimensional” (23). Woolf also records her interest in the fourth dimension in trying “new experiments”: “I’m trying to get the 4 dimensions of the mind . . . life in connection with emotions from literature—A day’s walk—a mind’s adventure: something like that” (D 5: 96). H.D. writes that Freud had “dared” to connect the dream to the unexplored of the unconscious: “The picture-writing, the hieroglyph of the dream was the common property of the whole race; in the dream, man, as at the beginning of time, spoke a universal language”—in entering this “universal understanding,” H.D. envisions man forgoing “barriers of time and space, and man, understanding man, would save mankind” (Tribute 71). Diana Collecot, in “Images at the Crossroads: The ‘H.D. Scrapbook’,” contextualizes Macpherson’s unconventional range of montage techniques in Borderline with Eisenstein’s and Hanns Sachs’s Close Up articles.
desire to direct his audiences into specific channels of thought and action and H.D.’s desire to open audiences to an experience of and reflection on channels of thought and action. In 1929, Eisenstein writes, “Whereas the conventional film directs and develops the *emotions* here we have a hint of the possibility of likewise developing and directing the entire *thought process*” (180). Film, according to H.D., allowed one to “dissect” and “analyse” the thought process as well as the work of art itself: by incorporating the audience’s critical attention into the mechanism of the work of art, film could create a collaborative rather than directive relationship (*CU* 119). H.D.’s interest in Freudian psychoanalysis with its tendency toward open, continuous interpretation underlies the difference of her approach to cinema. As Humm writes, “Freud’s psychology of dreams” offered an alternative to “narrative literature’s more naturalistic representations of character” (*Modernist Women* 134). H.D. takes up this alternative approach to narrative, one that does not foreclose the meaning of “reality” as it would in didactic art, both in her work in film and her own prose.

Late in life, Freud increasingly turned (or returned) to a two-way interaction with the literary arts. Freud took H.D. as a patient in Vienna at an extremely difficult time, for three months in 1933 and five weeks in 1934. Then engaged in writing *Moses and Monotheism* and having just published *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud recognized the potential of their “vers-libre” exchange. H.D. would benefit from analysis in working through her writer’s block, and she would also be able to integrate the perspective of psychoanalysis by studying it with a figure who would sanction her special status as a scribe. Freud would benefit from the presence of a sympathetic analysand who saw him

---

39 However, Humm fails to distinguish between H.D.’s and Eisenstein’s ideological approaches.
as more than a “physician” by acknowledging his aesthetic vision, and he would also have an account of his late wisdom witnessed in the timeless realm of art.\footnote{Friedman focuses on the “vers-libre” aspect of their relationship in her introduction to their letters; significantly, she quotes H.D.’s unpublished “poem about Freud, ‘The Master,’ a lyric narrative” that prefigures her later fictional retellings of the relationship in \textit{Trilogy} and \textit{Helen and Egypt} (xxi). H.D. dedicates \textit{Tribute to Freud} to the “blameless physician.”} During the early and mid-thirties, H.D. participated in the procedures and principles of avant-garde silent cinema and Freudian analysis—both of which had reached a threshold of potential dissolution. Bringing both together in her writing would not only give them a new life, but would also give her prose a new life since cinema and psychoanalysis provided techniques to integrate contingent narrative realities and the timeless abstractions of her poetics. Laura Marcus has pointed to the centrality of the concept of cinema in H.D.’s subsequent works concerned with psychoanalysis—\textit{Tribute to Freud} and \textit{The Gift}. In both “autobiography is intertwined with a history of optics, the past is recalled by means of the technologies of memory” (\textit{CU} 100).

In both parts of \textit{Tribute to Freud}, “Writing on the Wall” and “Advent” (the first written in London in the autumn of 1944, the second from the notebooks written during her work with Freud in 1933 and reworked in Lausanne in the winter of 1948), memory and optics recur as structural nodal points. They develop as motifs central to H.D.’s understanding of her identity and work as a writer. Before beginning H.D.’s analysis, Freud prepared by reading one of H.D.’s novels that has the images of optics and memory at its center, \textit{Palimpsest}, and after analysis, these themes, cultivated in her “vers-libre” relationship with Freud, become central to the structure of \textit{The Gift}. In the first entry of “Advent,” March 2, 1933, H.D. sets down a number of associative memories,

\footnote{Friedman focuses on the “vers-libre” aspect of their relationship in her introduction to their letters; significantly, she quotes H.D.’s unpublished “poem about Freud, ‘The Master,’ a lyric narrative” that prefigures her later fictional retellings of the relationship in \textit{Trilogy} and \textit{Helen and Egypt} (xxi). H.D. dedicates \textit{Tribute to Freud} to the “blameless physician.”}
memories that recur in *The Gift*, that locate her in a heritage of optics: “my father’s telescope, my grandfather’s microscope. If I let this go (I, this one drop, this one ego under the microscope-telescope of Sigmund Freud) I fear to be dissolved utterly” (116). H.D. undertook analysis with Freud with two major motives: to resolve the traumas of the previous war in order to be prepared for the coming war, and to take up the vision of Freud’s optics—working as an artist rather than as a licensed practitioner—in order to continue disseminating that vision in her work after the war and his passing.41 In the same entry, H.D. notes, “Kenneth Macpherson called me ‘recording angel’,” and, indeed, we see her serving in this role between two generations: the younger represented by Macpherson and cinema, and the older represented by Freud and psychoanalysis (117).

These two motives also serve her identity as a writer, working at a meaningful art in a time of crisis. Although H.D. felt she had reached a period of sterility in her writing by 1932, going to Freud was neither a retreat from either her writer’s identity nor from the coming war.42 Indeed, Vienna placed her at the center of the storm, which she believed enabled her to overcome her fears for the coming war. Whereas the First World War had taken place largely at a distance, marching “through the barbed-wire on May-

41 In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. writes, “I had begun my preliminary research in order to fortify and equip myself to face war when it came, and to help in some subsidiary way, if my training were sufficient and my aptitudes suitable, with war-shocked and war-shattered people” (93). However, they had barely begun analysis before the “approaching ordeal,” the “death-head swastika chalked on the pavement, leading to the Professor’s very door” made dealing with “my own personal little Dragon of war-terror” absurd to her (94).

42 Friedman in “A Coda” also makes this point: “Vulnerable in Vienna during the rise of Nazism, both H.D. and Freud used psychoanalysis not as a hermetically sealed realm of escape from the gathering storm but as a means of understanding the violence and desire in the human psyche and their manifestation in the dialectical play of *eros* and *thanatos* on the larger stage of history” (*AF* 538).
day” and staying through the bombings in London allowed H.D. to experience and confront trauma at its source, as it happened (AF 183). Her time in Vienna was marked by a new intensity of interest in politics. She wrote to Bryher on March 10, 1933 of delighting in spending her time at a café patronized by students (and herself being identified as a student as well) where she spends “all [her] time buried in newspapers” (AF 68). Analysis with Freud “is the chance of a lifetime,” in that she, a recording angel, can acquire the weapons necessary to fight the recurring crises of civilization: “I collect and note all papa’s remarks, which may be useful ammunition against the world, for all time” (AF 68). In “Writing on the Wall,” H.D. fashions herself as the special “student working under the direction of the greatest mind of this and of perhaps many succeeding generations” (18). When H.D. immediately states, “[b]ut the Professor was not always right,” she suggests not righteous dissent, but marks out her own keen ability to perceive the “heal-all” that he denies is to be found in his “discoveries”: “He said, ‘My discoveries are not primarily a heal-all. My discoveries are a basis for a very grave philosophy. There are very few who understand this, there are very few who are capable of understanding this’” (18). In The Gift, H.D. sets out to prove that she is capable of understanding and, moreover, of communicating what he “discovered” for the human race by offering her own childhood, transformed into allegory, as a figure for examining “the childhood of the race” and pursuing a philosophy that could change the trajectory of history (18, 12).

During this period, Woolf also turned to newspapers, creating a scrapbook and noting headlines in her diaries, which would serve the montage of Three Guineas and as a
significant connection among the villagers of *Between the Acts*. While less likely than H.D. to take up the metaphors of war (preferring “immunity” to “ammunition”), Woolf also saw her work as a writer as contributing potentially to a future of pacifism.

However, Woolf shared with Freud—in contrast to H.D.’s tendency toward optimism—a sense of the futility of her work. Woolf writes in her diary in 1931, “Meanwhile the country is in the throes of a crisis. Great events are brewing. […] Are we living then through a crisis; & am I fiddling? & will future ages, as they say, behold our predicament […] with horror?” (*D* 4: 39). In a letter to Bryher, March 22, 1933, H.D. records a conversation with Freud who has been “shocked psychically by Germany.” H.D. attempts to reassure him with evidence of “the English open-mindedness toward the Jew” and argues that England’s pledge to France will give Hitler pause:

> He says, ‘yes. But before he [Hitler] has time to think, many, many people will be murdered.’ (He meant Jews.) I said I didn’t think massacre was possible, there was still the open sympathy of the world. Poor old, old little old papa. However, he gave a flea-shake to his shoulders and said, ‘well, we better go on with your analysis. It is the only thing now.’ So, on we plunged. (*AF* 135)

Bryher’s letter to Kenneth Macpherson describing her visits with Freud offers the latter’s perspective on the redemptive possibilities (which Bryher espoused) of psychoanalysis.

---

43 There are several interesting connections between Woolf and H.D. during this period. H.D. was reading with great interest Dame Ethel Smyth’s memoirs, *Impressions That Remained*, and Woolf had cultivated a close relationship with the idiosyncratic composer and women’s rights advocate. Smyth’s text which looked to the past and her pioneering spirit that forged a path as a creative outsider, likely influenced both H.D.’s and Woolf’s writing in the late 1930s. Conversely, both H.D. (who had known him personally) and Woolf (who had not) were also reading the letters and autobiographies of D.H. Lawrence which proliferated during this period; in their reflections on Lawrence, both sound a similar note in remarking upon the limitations that Lawrence’s masculinism and ego imposed on his works. Woolf also began reading Freud attentively at the end of the 1930s.
Freud “tweaked” her by calling her too “warlike,” and Bryher responded by suggesting that, if she could be an analyst, and if:

all England were analysed the world would be reformed. He roared with laughter (so wrong of him) and said I was an incurable optimist and what did I think analysis was? He saw it as a philosophical system applicable to some earnest thinkers who might influence the great wave of life, and I it appeared, simply viewed it as an antidote against evil. […] He said well, there was nothing for him to do but to let this new young generation fight it out and he hoped I would enjoy it, but he was too old. (AF 348-9)

All that is left for H.D. and Woolf, it seemed, was the attempt to open the “sympathy of the world” through literature—a prose made powerful by the montage techniques of newsreel cinema and the insights of psychoanalysis. Facing the coming storm, they could only “plunge” on, hoping not to save their generation but those that would follow.

Like Edmund Wilson, H.D. characterizes two different paths her contemporaries took in the “period of waiting, of marking time” after the First World War: one group characterized by “a growing feeling of stagnation, of lethargy,” whereas the others, “who were aware of the trend of political events […] were almost too clever, too politically minded” (Tribute 57). Whether in Vienna with Freud or London with Bryher during the Blitz, H.D. is able to balance an immersion in political events with reflection and creation. If Freud is the “old Hermit who lived on the edge of this vast domain” whom she had pulled into the “shallows” to learn from “how best to steer [her] course,” then her contemporaries either “refused to admit the fact that the flood was coming,” or “counted the nails and measured the planks with endless exact mathematical formulas, but didn’t seem to have the very least idea of how to put the Ark together” (Tribute 13, 57). Freud provides H.D. with a site to resume her creative identity and feel she is navigating this
duality. When Freud suggested that she is not happy, H.D. describes herself in a period of limbo, preparing for a different kind of happiness,

It is happiness of the quest.
I am on the fringes or in the prenumbra of the light of my father’s science and my mother’s art—the psychology or philosophy of Sigmund Freud.
I must find new words as the Professor found or coined new words to explain certain as yet unrecorded states of mind or being. (*Tribute* 145)

And in writing her way out of that limbo, she will contribute to the quest for “a formula for Time that has not yet been computed” (*Tribute* 145).

Freud played multiple roles for H.D. (as H.D. did for him), acting as both mentor, “blameless physician,” Faustian alchemist, and muse. Strikingly, H.D. uses many of the same images to describe her relationship to Freud as she had to describe the relationship of her characters Raymonde and Ermy in the “Murex” story of *Palimpsest*. During their analysis, H.D. interprets a dream of herself “*salting* my typewriter. So I presume I would salt my savorless writing with the salt of the earth, Sigmund Freud’s least utterance” (*AF* 148). In *Palimpsest*, Raymonde recalls the men marching to war: “Formula to be enduring must be destroyed. […] Feet, feet, feet, feet— the absolute lack of the salt in the formula had sent them to die” (155), and finds in the Jew Ermy Solomon the salt that could alter the Western formula.44 Before beginning treatment, H.D. quotes *Palimpsest*’s recurring line of the need to “carry on, carry on” after the war; in a letter to Havelock Ellis describing the analysis Bryher has arranged, she reflects on the possibility

---

44 H.D. also believed that Freud would help her steer safely by her tendency toward mysticism; she wrote to Havelock Ellis, January 26, 1933: “I think I wobble dangerously on that very-fine line between science and occultism, and there Freud will help me” (*AF* 18).
of becoming “the poet-psycho-analyst (can you imagine?)” and hopes, in any case, to be able then “to carry the torch and carry on, as we used to say” (AF 11).

H.D.’s interest in the salt of Freud’s “new words” seems most significant for her prose, as she turns from her dream to analyzing her current identity as a writer, listing various semi-autobiographical prose works and expressing dissatisfaction for all (AF 148). Although “the poems are satisfactory,” “unlike most poets of my acquaintance (and I have known many) I am no longer interested in a poem once it is written, projected, or materialized”; H.D. continues to be interested in reworking her prose, however, where she struggles to balance a “human” perspective with a “sense of direction” (149). In many ways *Palimpsest* marked H.D.’s successful transition from the limits of the imagist poem.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, H.D.’s letters show significant moments of retrenchment in her identity as foremost a poet, influenced by the public’s demands in the 1930s and early 1950s. In contrast to Lawrence Rainey’s portrayal of H.D. as unconcerned with her audience, these letters reveal the importance of an audience to her work. Having made her name as the poet of imagism, H.D. is haunted by the identity of that “first writing-period in London, you might say of my ‘success,’ small and rather specialized as it was” (Tribute 149). The reception of her experimental prose work—particularly fiction that was not “Greek”—paled in comparison. In 1934, H.D. writes with relief to George Plank, who has congratulated her on her Dijon series of short prose works: “It is marvelous to find one isn’t just broad-casting right straight into a vacuum, as

⁴⁵ McAlmon’s introduction noted this transition; he writes that by the 1920s, H.D. was “person enough for the now, for her, safe ‘harp with one string’ frozen lyric; and for prose also” (241)
I was beginning to feel I was” (AF 427). Whereas she is often at pains to emphasize the
necessity of working on both prose and poetry, on August 25, 1935, H.D. writes to
Bryher a list of realizations that mark (in theory) a return to her “Greek spirit” of imagist
work (but in practice, did not significantly): “2. Apart from all that actual inner urge, this
is the ONE thing that my public, my ‘fans’ have been clamouring for” (AF 530).
Similarly, writing Euripides’ Ion, H.D. claims Freud’s analysis and her work allowed her
“to say to myself I am, I AM a POET” (AF 539). Nonetheless, she wrote to Bryher two
years earlier of Conrad Aiken, “C.A. has always boosted my prose, one of the few
people, who takes my prose AS PROSE, not as an aberration of a poet,” and suggests that
with Aiken’s help offering the “objective toward printing” she “could slog away at the
prose” with hope (AF 334). H.D. later writes to Aiken, August 6, 1933, thanking him for
his review of Palimpsest: “such bad prose too. Yes and no. I mean it was trying to do
the impossible. Which I am still trying for—but this time in a bigger way—a ‘Circle’”
(365). Despite Rainey’s claims that H.D. ignored her audience, the need to publish seems
a decisive influence on her inability to continue her prose work at this period.

Clearly, H.D. uses her analysis with Freud to reconsider how to fuse a human
narrative with the perfected but abstracted poetic in her “books”: “Perhaps the books I
last wrote of were too self-centered or ‘narcissistic’ to satisfy my heart,” and she thinks

46 Woolf also expressed fear of the loss of her audience: “No audience. No echo. That’s part of
one’s death” (D 5: 293). But I disagree with Leaska’s reading of Woolf’s statement in 1940: “It’s
odd to feel one’s writing in a vacuum—no-one will read it. I feel the audience has gone.” Leaska
writes, “Shorn of verbal adornment,” Woolf’s message is: “If people stop reading the books of
Virginia Woolf, there will soon be no Virginia Woolf” (459). Such a shearing reduces Woolf to a
rather egoistic author; yes, Woolf saw the audience as crucial, but not merely for confirming her
identity or fame. Rather, lacking an audience, the work of art as she envisioned it—the work
toward a new plot in life as in art—could not go on. Benjamin also suffered in this way; he wrote
in a letter to Gershon Scholem on February 4, 1939, “The isolation I live in, and especially work
in here, creates an abnormal dependence on the reception my production encounters” (241).
her “mother’s art” might be the necessary “transfusion” (*Tribute* 151). Notably she has recorded Freud’s discussion on being the site of “the mother in transference” for her (a role he was always a bit surprised and shocked at playing), and H.D., nonetheless, identifies him at times with both her mother and father, but prefers not to categorize him as either (146). H.D. writes of “the catch” of her attempt to balance the abstraction of poetry and the personal investment of prose in light of analysis: “The critical faculty can guide and direct us but it is not easy to be critical and at the same time recapture the flame that glowed with unreserved abandon” (151). The relationship with Freud, however, is crucial to her ability to find a method “to synthesize the American scene, the war-zone and the present,” although the “present” of her writing is finally not the present of 1933, when she writes this in a letter, but will prove to be several years distant, after a period of being a “caterpillar” (*AF* 366, 534).

In its unique structure, *The Gift* does indeed achieve a balance—playing the narcissistic optics against the de-centering of her mother’s arts, combining the critical perspective of the analyst with the vital first-hand experience of analysand. Like Woolf, H.D. takes a cue from Freud’s theorization of the mind as a microcosm of the “childhood of the race” and sets out to return to “the land—roots down into the earth.” Rather than turning to “Oedipus,” H.D. attempts to discover one of the “thousands of other myths as applicable, still unexploited,” that will thus enable her to “[t]rail the whole show over America and antiquity plus war and modern Europe—bombast, of course” (*AF* 389). The ideas behind this 1933 bombast, nonetheless, would in *The Gift* constellate the traumas of the First and Second World War, America and modern Europe, the lyrics and barbarisms of civilization since antiquity, through the perspective of the artist’s childhood.
H.D.’s formulation of the method of *The Gift* after her exchange with Freud is evident in her correspondence with Norman Holmes Pearson, an important admirer who would be central in securing H.D.’s status as an important poet of modernism after he met her in 1937. In her first letter to Pearson, December 12, 1937, H.D. responds to Pearson’s inquiries about her poetry (why, when, how she wrote her early poems). H.D. contrasts the image of the “the inner world of imagination, the ivory tower, where poets presumably do live” with the harsh realities of wartime London (*Between History* 8). In *Mythology and the Romantic Imagination*, published that year, Douglas Bush had derided H.D.’s work, arguing that H.D. had been “content to inhabit the ivory tower” which her Victorian Hellenist precursors “were always breaking out of” (505). In her letter to the twenty-three years younger Pearson, she recounts reading—during a WWI air raid—a letter from Harriet Monroe which suggested “that H.D. would do so well, maybe, and finally, if she could get into ‘life,’ into the rhythm of our time, in touch with events and so on […]. Ivory Tower? That was and is still, I believe with many, the final indictment of this sort of poetry,” but in order to explain it to Pearson, “I must, you see, drag in a whole deracinated epoc[h]” (9). As if offering an allegory, H.D. describes returning home after a bombing, presumably with Richard Aldington, who football-kicked with his army boot a volume of Browning: “He demanded dramatically, ‘what is the use of all this—now?’ To me, *Fortu* and the *yellow melon flower* answered by existing. They were in other space, other dimension, never so clear as at that very moment. The unexpected *isle in the far seas* remained. Remains” (9).

---

47 The young American poet encouraged H.D.’s return to poetry after the Second World War, voicing her “clamouring” fans in America.
In the 1930s, H.D. is preparing herself to face the final turning of an apocalyptic epoch. While her letter holds that dismissing her WWI imagist poetry as irrelevant postings from the “ivory tower” is too simplistic, she acknowledges tacitly the need to bring the timeless dimension of the poetic into the discordant rhythm of the life of the times. In the next war, H.D. did not retreat to the tower of her early imagist work. As she wrote in *Tribute to Freud*, “we are here today in a city of ruin, a world ruined […]. We must forgo a flight from reality into the green pastures of the cool recesses of the Academe; […] we are not ready for discussion of the Absolute, Absolute Beauty, Absolute Truth, Absolute Goodness”; although those of her generation and the older generation have “rested in the pastures” and “wandered beside those still waters,” the younger generation have not and could not in the present crisis (84-85). Rather, H.D.’s prose and her epic poems of the Second World War would discover the “unexpected isle” in the very moment. Rather than abstracting her self, in *The Gift* she would become the still center in a rocking world able to discover beauty in her prosaic reality, sifting and ordering the “remains” of memory as the site for her audiences’ future production. Just as Woolf asks the young poet to take up her model, “to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely” (*CE* 2: 191), H.D. returns to her metaphor of the poet as “mollusk,” alternately preserving and creating. In *Trilogy*, the poet tells the reader how to be the seashell, vulnerable to and absorbing fragments of the city of ruin and yet also “indigestible, hard, unngiving,” protected so as to concentrate on “living within” and enabling the poetic distillation of trauma, so that “you beget, self-out-of-self, // selfless, / that pearl-of-great-price” (9).
In *Tribute to Freud*, Freud’s gift of a flowering orange branch recalls the words of a song sung as a schoolchild, Goethe’s *Kennst du das Land?*, which becomes both a pearl given by Freud and a projection of another mollusk’s work in another space and time:

I could not have trusted myself to say the words. They were there. They were singing. They went on singing like an echo of an echo in a shell—very far away yet very near—the very shell substance of my outer ear and the curled involuted or convoluted shell skull, and inside the skull, the curled intricate, hermit-like mollusk, the brain-matter itself. Thoughts are things—sometimes they are songs. I did not have to recall the words, I had not written them. Another mollusk in a hard cap of bone or shell had projected these words. There was a song set to them, that still another singing skull had fashioned. (90)

This passage moves from the dialectics of word and song, to song and thought, to thought and word, by means of a montage of images that take us from a seashell, to the literal matter of the mind, to the juxtaposition of one poet’s skull in the present to another’s creating the poem in the far past, to another setting the lyric to music in the not so distant past, to H.D. writing this memory of Freud placing it in yet a new context of analysis. This montage method, which draws upon music and moving images, is central to H.D.’s *The Gift* and Woolf’s *Between the Acts* and enables the texts to both preserve beauty—placing Goethe and other precursors in the context of the present—and to create beauty. Nonetheless, neither proposes an “Absolute Beauty,” or offers readers either an ivory tower or green pasture for escape. Beauty is found in the complex and difficult connections between individuals, space, and time, which these texts—islands that remain in the midst of a storm—focus on revealing and begetting.
CHAPTER 7

THREE LEVELS OF MONTAGE

7.1 H.D.’s *The Gift* and Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*

We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected. But when it is under assault and enemy bombs are already taking their toll, what enervated, perverse antiquities do they not lay bare in the foundations. What things were interred and sacrificed amid magic incantations, what horrible cabinet of curiosities lies there below, where the deepest shafts are reserved for what is most commonplace. (Benjamin, “One-Way Street” 62)

This chapter is centrally concerned with a comparative analysis of two novels written in the period before and during the Second World War, H.D.’s *The Gift* and Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*. Both are lyric narratives written at a time when critics, ostensibly speaking for the public and for the younger generation of artists, disparaged a high modernist approach as an unsuitable response to the present duress. As T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” (1936) intimated, the crises of the 1930s led to a re-turning to time past, an attention to time future, and a refinement of fundamental values in the intensity of time present, “At the still point of the turning world” (2.16). For Woolf and H.D. in literature, Walter Benjamin in criticism and Germaine Dulac in film, the return of World War meant a return to the fundamental principles guiding their creative lives—the dialectical vision of lyric narrative. Reconsidering how the ethics of their aesthetics
contributed to the impending catastrophe, they took their stand upon the present moment, turned their eyes upon the far and immediate past, and spoke to the future.

Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” hovers over this chapter (“Theses” 257), as it does many accounts of late modernism.1 Tyrus Miller uses the “backward-turned glance” of Benjamin’s angel to characterize late modernists: “Facing an unexpected stop, late modernists took a detour into the political regions” that high modernists had viewed from a distance. “Precisely in their untimeliness, their lack of symmetry and formal balance, they retain the power to transport their readers and critics ‘out of bounds’—to an ‘elsewhere’ of writing from which the period can be surveyed, from which its legitimacy as a whole might be called into question” (13). As I show, this description might more aptly be applied to high modernists writing during the period of late modernism, who more forcefully direct our gaze backward in order to question the “legitimacy” of the present day. Miller convincingly argues that late modernist writers “reassembled fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world’s end. […] Sinking themselves faithlessly into a present devoid of future, into a movement grinding to a halt and an aesthetic on the threshold of dissolution,” preparing “themselves, without hope, to pass over to the far side of the end” (14). H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin compose ruins out of allegorical fragments as well, but not without hope, and

---

1 Jean Radford’s “Late Modernism and the Politics of History” reads women writers of the 1930s alongside Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History.” The latter text, in which the angel of history appears, read as “Redemptive Critique” prefaces Peter Bürger’s “The Decline of Modernism.” In his analysis of Between the Acts in A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War, Sebastian Knowles figures Woolf herself as the Janus-faced angel, accentuating a negative dialectics more characteristic of Adorno than Benjamin. Woolf strangely becomes a specimen caught between the literary historian’s lenses in this reading: “Half the book places an old world under glass, the other half presses its face to the glass in front. Woolf looks forward and backward, and the book is caught between the two worlds” (61).
for a future world. Neither accepting critics’ demand for a return to nineteenth-century realism nor entrenching themselves in the “totality” of modernist artwork, in these late works, they continued to develop lyric narrative by turning to the technique of montage.²

While montage had been present in their work throughout the previous decade, at the end of the 1930s, H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin share a new insistence on the power of the technique to activate audiences and efface the author. Both H.D.’s and Woolf’s novels include a staging of the author—the narrator of *The Gift* and Miss La Trobe of *Between the Acts*—taking up montage as a technique to respond through their art to the socio-political moment. Benjamin’s exposé for the *Arcades Project*, a study of Baudelaire (the premier author figure of the project) was rejected in November 1938 by Theodor Adorno, who explained his rejection as owing to Benjamin’s refusal to play the author’s role of explaining the connections between the materials he had arranged in montage fashion, instead leaving critical illumination (and presumably mis-illumination)

² In “Realism in the Balance,” Lukács cites Nietzsche on the hallmarks of literary decadence: “It is that life no longer dwells in the totality. The word becomes sovereign and escapes from the confines of the sentence; the sentence encroaches on the page, obscuring its meaning; the page gains in vitality at the cost of the whole—the whole ceases to be a whole. But that is the equation of every decadent style: always the same anarchy of the atoms, disintegration of the will” (*AP* 44). Significantly Lukács omits the rest of the quote which describes that disintegration as “freedom of the individual, in moral terms—generalized into a political theory: ‘equal rights for all’” (*AP* 44). While Lukács champions the Popular Front as the soil for his progressive literary realism, it is clear that the artists of the Popular Front—including Dulac—did not necessarily agree with his viewpoint. Brecht wrote of Lukács’s praise of his *The Informer*: Lukács has welcomed *The Informer* as if I were a sinner returning to the bosom of the Salvation Army. At last something taken from life itself! He has overlooked the montage of 27 scenes and the fact that it is really no more than a catalogue of gestures, such as the gesture of falling silent, of looking over one’s shoulder, of terror, etc.; in short, the gestures of life under a dictatorship. (*AP* 58)
to the reader. In this chapter, I examine the technique of montage on three levels. And, as H.D.’s image of the poet as history’s cinematograph suggests, it is appropriate to think of vertical levels (the layers on a film’s reel) in addition to the horizontal unspooling of montage: the simulation machine of cinematic montage is simply the newest technology in a series of layered analogies that inform these works, such as the palimpsest, the archaeological dig, and the layered topographies of an anthropological psychology. The first level of montage in these works is the portrayal of the technique undertaken by an artist within the story-world. The second level of montage is the author’s use of the technique as a structuring device of the text itself. In examining these two levels, I am primarily concerned with the relationship the text creates with its audience. Why is it important to frame the performance of a montage within the text? How does the portrayal affect the reader’s relationship to a text that itself utilizes the technique? Why turn to this technique in response to the return of World War?

While the latter question will lead me to a discussion of the vision these authors attempt to create for their readers, it will also lead me to the third level of montage and particularly Benjamin’s Arcades Project. The third level of montage, which I introduce

3 In the foreword to their translation of The Arcades Project, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin argue for the increasing importance of the “montage form” in Benjamin’s work, citing “One-Way Street,” “A Berlin Childhood around 1900,” and “On the Concept of History” (xi). “What is distinctive about The Arcades Project—in Benjamin’s mind, it always dwelt apart—is the working of quotations into the framework of montage, so much so that they eventually far outnumber the commentaries” (xi). Moreover, they connect this “transcendence of the conventional book form” to “the blasting apart of pragmatic historicism” (xi).

4 Benjamin began work on the project in 1927, but on May 3, 1936 could still claim in a letter to Scholem that “not a syllable of the actual text exists, even though the end of preparatory studies is now within sight” (178). At that time, “The Work of Art” was about to appear, and Benjamin’s work on the project would rapidly increase in the coming years.
here but discuss in the next chapter, involves how these texts were assembled for our present vision. In addition to the texts’ use of the technique and self-reflexive portrayal of montage, H.D.’s *The Gift*, Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* each carry with them the good fortune and burden of intervening hands that reassembled the texts to be available to readers. Dulac, the figure in this study most attune to the power of montage, turned from a lyric narrative cinema to unconventional newsreels that were described by viewers as combining lyric and documentary in the 1930s. However, because Dulac’s work has not received the same degree of intercession and reclamation by scholars and, ironically, because of the lesser value the ephemeral newsreel has held, these important texts are lost to us, and thus Dulac can only be discussed peripherally in this chapter. It is precisely the intervention of readers who lay hands upon the texts—editors—and writers who read these montages and write back in their margins—scholars and critics—that has enabled H.D.’s, Woolf’s, and Benjamin’s texts to speak to subsequent generations.

Rather than entering into debates that view these interventions as disruptions of the author’s “true intentions,” my conclusion examines how these later-day readers act as caretakers of the vision embedded within these texts and how the texts themselves are

---

5 Siân Reynolds’s “Germaine Dulac and French Documentary film making in the 1930s” discusses the lack of attention Dulac’s documentary work has received, due primarily to its inaccessibility. Reynolds writes,

> After the coming of sound, she made no further fiction features, and in the 1930s, went to work for Gaumont. At the same time, she formed a small company France-Actualités, associated with Gaumont but editorially independent, to make newsreels and documentaries (1932-35). After suffering a stroke in the mid-1930s she did little active directing, but was closely involved with Popular Front cultural groups in 1936, acting as an adviser on several films. Having become increasingly immobile, she died in 1942 in obscurity, during the German Occupation. (72)

Reynolds discusses three types of documentary work Dulac created: “the newsreel, the compilation history and the political campaign film” (73).
designed to hail such future readers. At the third level of montage, how does the intervention of editors and scholars affect our view of these texts? Moreover, how do our views of these authors—particularly their biographies of suicide, breakdown, and survival in relation to the moment of their writing—not only affect our view of the texts, but also engender the onus of transmission? Does tragic biography increase the likelihood of transmission to the common reader? Despite the great difficulty of these texts, they have nonetheless attracted significant audiences in the last decades. Have we reached a “now of recognizability” as Benjamin theorized, in which the moment of the past is “actualized” in its performance in the present moment, a “now” equipped to recognize it? (Arcades N18,4: 486). Is there a gap, and could we know if there is, between the vision H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin put forward in arranging these texts, and the vision we look for in our present turning to these texts?

7.2 The Gift: The Optics of Memory

Peter Bürger has argued that montage is “the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art” (72), and while it is indeed a common thread, its use and effects proved as disparate as the various avant-garde movements between the wars. Writing of the “Futurist moment,” Marjorie Perloff’s assessment of the avant-garde between the wars has rightly identified the paradoxical crossroads that the failures of the period culminated in: the failure of the pre-WWI hopes for revolution, renaissance, and utopia led not only to the “the anarchic and nihilistic spirit of Dada,” but also to “a renewed longing for transcendence,” giving birth to the “Surrealist movement” as well as “the proto-Fascist strain” (xvii). During this period, the avant-garde turned to “collage and its cognates
(montage, assemblage, construction),” an aesthetic that visualizes the text as “neither quite ‘verse’ or ‘prose’” and that is symptomatic of a desire to transcend social, political, and national borders (Perloff xviii). While Perloff examines the collage technique of the pre-First World War futurists, her characteristics of the technique are valuable in considering the turn in late modernism to montage—a turn, I argue, marked not by a desire to transcend, but to engage with social, political, and national borders. According to Perloff, futurist collage was a “propaganda art,” destroying what Charles Olson called “the lyrical interference of the ego” by the “I in literature” (Perloff 54, 58). Montage in the works of late modernism is similar to Cubist collage in subverting the inherited romantic lyric “I” and instead creating a work in which “the signifiers refer to a presence that is consistently absent” (Perloff 63). In The Gift, H.D.’s decentering of the “lyrical […] ego” enables her to engage with politics and the reader in a new way.

In “Reflections in Conclusion” in Aesthetics and Politics, Fredric Jameson proposes a view of modernism less invested in a modernist narrative, focusing instead on the importance of modernist techniques, such as montage, to engage with the world:

Modernism would then not be so much a way of avoiding social content—in any case an impossibility for beings like ourselves who are ‘condemned’ to history and to the implacable sociability of even the most apparently private of experiences—as rather of managing and containing it, secluding it out of sight in the very form itself, by means of specific techniques of framing and displacement which can be identified with precision. (202)

In The Gift, montage certainly functions for H.D.’s narrator (and herself as author) as a technique to manage and contain an extremely varied social content, ranging across centuries and continents, in the editing of a sequence of “apparently private experiences.” However, we should resist a moral judgment of the technique that the words “managing
and containing” evoke. For it is by means of the “specific techniques of framing and displacement,” readily “identified with precision” by her readers, that H.D. compels readers to lay hands on a content that cannot readily be managed or contained. By refracting her self as a subject in the narrative, providing readers with multiple frames, and displacing the conventional orientation to history and to present realities, H.D. requires readers to engage with not merely the text but the unmanageable world constituting the text.

As in Dulac’s avant-garde cinema and Benjamin’s theory, montage is not necessarily a closed circuit or one-way street. Rather it can be a means of disrupting the distance between the work of art and one’s lived reality, without, however, collapsing that ground or sublating both into the capitalist market. In arguing for the 1930s as a moment of reassessment, Miller turns to Benjamin’s 1930 “Crisis of the Novel,” which maps two strains of the modernist novel: one characterized by Andre Gide’s The Counterfeiters, “marked by purity, formal mastery, and orientation toward unique interiorized experience,” and the other by Alfred Doblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz, “epic” “by [its] heterogeneity of materials, montage techniques, and orientation toward everyday life and speech,” techniques which “open the literary work to an array of extraliterary contents” (15). One particularly important extraliterary content for these works, I would argue, is the reader. As the reader enters into the work of producing the montage text, the text’s “contents” become dialectical; readers encounter them as elements of the work of art and elements of their everyday reality.

Montage, then, in the period of late modernism may have the effect of reifying the aura of the high modernist work distant from “reality” or it may have the effect of
destabilizing the role of author and audience in the high modernist work engaged with the constitution of “reality” as well as aura. A technique increasingly essential to her work, montage for Woolf often served as a means for exploring the element of anonymity, also described as impersonality (meaning for Woolf a dethroning of authorial ego, rather than Eliot’s definition) and related to immunity. In comparison, montage for H.D. made possible a decentering of the author’s presence and a reorienting of the reader. Woolf chose anonymity precisely at the point when she had achieved a high degree of popularity and the status of high modernism was being challenged by factions from the younger and older generations. H.D., whose prose work had yet to find a responsive audience and who had managed to break from the impersonality (in Eliot’s sense) of her early imagist lyrics, chose the role of auteur. Her presence is refracted in *The Gift*, teasingly present as a first-person narrator who witnesses memories and dreams of the child Hilda, and then distant and removed as a co-collaborator in the text’s “Notes” who invites the reader to inhabit her standpoint. These choices of anonymity and auteur via the technique of montage also reflect the authors’ reactions to the coming war: the articulation of an outsider’s pacifism on Woolf’s part (the argument of *Three Guineas*) and the turn to the outsider scribe on H.D.’s part (the central figure of *Trilogy*).

Both believed in art as a site of collaborative work that would provide the ground for discovering the failures of the status quo and for awakening to the necessity of a different narrative of history. However, montage in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* emphasizes collaboration, a pluralist “we,” whereas montage in H.D.’s *The Gift* emphasizes the creative “I.” For H.D., this creative self is not the domineering egotist or preacher that is warned against in Woolf’s essays. Rather, in offering a montage dictated
by the memory of a humble yet singular speaker, H.D. offers an “I” that is at once approachable—a common reader—and alchemical, able to mine a collective unconscious to connect with the distant past. Through the author’s arrangement of the montages of the inner eye of the “I” in *The Gift*, H.D. both models and provides the ground for an engaged, creative ethic for the reader. The narrator, an unlikely war hero, performs an alternative mythos. As she had written in 1933, H.D. rejects the old myths, such as “Oedipus,” and charts the writer’s attempt to discover one of the “thousands of other myths as applicable, still unexploited” that might enable a different future (*AF* 389).

Montage allows H.D. to craft this alternate epic; the narrator certainly is in danger as she writes during the air raids over London, but the physical journey, action, and violence of the traditional epic is supplanted by the journey of the mind across time, creation, and the effort of communication. In taking up the optics of memory, H.D.’s novel ultimately does succeed in the “bombast” of her intent to “[t]rail the whole show over America and antiquity plus war and modern Europe” (*AF* 389). Just as the deflationary caveat “bombast” allows H.D.’s intent to remain earnest while acknowledging its limitations and partiality, the blurring of genres emphasized by H.D.’s montage method allows the “I” of the narrator to serve not merely her own ego, but to serve her readers. The epigraph of *The Gift*’s first chapter “Dark Room,” from Camille Flammarion’s *Death and Its Mystery*, introduces the reader to the author’s role as a conduit—“The brain comes into play, yes, but it is only the tool . . . the telephone is not the person speaking over it. The dark room is not the photograph” (33)—and to our role in realizing, making real, what is transmitted.
Although she did not begin writing *The Gift* until 1941, resuming writing in 1943 and 1944 during the air raids on London,⁶ it is clear that the motifs of the text had been developing since analysis with Freud. Indeed, psychoanalysis provided H.D. with a model for interrupting the chronological sequence of time conventional to the memoir genre; the associative leaps of memory are the basis for her montage technique. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. articulates the alternative orientation to time that their interaction enabled: “The years went forward, then backward. The shuttle of the years ran a thread that wove my pattern into the Professor’s.” She continues, comparing each of their memories of flowers in Rome, “It was not that he conjured up the past and invoked the future. It was a present that was in the past or a past that was in the future” (9). H.D. states early in “Writing on the Wall,” “I do not want to become involved in the strictly historical sequence,” as the many “memoirs” that were to be published about Freud would, rather, she would follow a more Freudian line: “Let the impressions come in their own way, make their own sequence” (14). In *The Gift*, not only does the montage technique of memory disrupt a “historical sequence,” a false historicism, but also makes possible a connection with the co-creator of the sequence. Montage allows H.D. to

---

⁶ The manuscript of *The Gift* was not published until 1982 by New Directions. As many scholars have shown, the New Directions edition is an abridgement of the manuscript, omitting a chapter (now chapter two) and making other significant cuts such as the extensive historical and biographical notes. Jane Augustine edited and annotated the University Press of Florida edition which is the complete text of *The Gift*, based on H.D.’s third and final typescript. All citations refer to Augustine’s 1998 edition. The first part of the typescript, the seven chapters, closes with “London—1941-1943,” and the second part, the “Notes,” comprised of seven sections separated by line spaces, closes with “London—1940-44.” Miriam Fuchs, paying careful attention to H.D.’s periods of writing, provides a detailed analysis of the influence of the immediate catastrophes of the Blitz as a stimulus to H.D.’s writing as opposed to the extended crises of World War II.
weave her pattern into that of the readers, and her tactics for decentering her authority as a speaker enable readers to weave their pattern into the text’s.

As Freud had in his work, H.D. wants readers to discover in her memories of the past (from Hilda’s lived childhood which is also allegorical for the childhood of the race) the foundations of the present moment. Rather than a work of personal psychoanalysis or an escape into the work of memoir during the Blitz, *The Gift*, I argue, attempts an engaged work of art that seeks the readers’ engagement with the world. The novel deploys a feminist “optics [as] a politics of positioning” as defined by Donna Haraway: “a doctrine and practice of objectivity, that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (194). H.D.’s feminist “objectivity” counters that of rationalist, scientific, and historicist objectivity; it instead is found in “the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives” (Haraway 194). The interruptions, layered perspectives, and attention to the limits of the optics of one’s position are made possible by H.D.’s montage technique, a technique that can retain the visionary and utopian momentum of H.D.’s “passionate detachment” (Haraway 194) yet make possible a work of art “engaged” with praxis (Bürger 91).

In *The Gift*, the first level of montage is the narrator composing a montage sequence of memories. In fact, “Dark Room” opens in the voice of a child, Hilda. It isn’t until the end of the chapter that we are made distinctly aware of the adult H.D. reliving the child’s perspective, as the narrator transitions from a first-person narration of Hilda’s point of view to speak as a first-person narrator who suggests that the preceding narrative has been an involuntary unfolding of memory: “now, through some curious combination
of circumstances, distance in time, in space, fever and turmoil of present-day events, certain chemical constituents of biological or psychic thought-processes are loosed—whatever thought is, nobody yet knows—and the film unrolls in my head” (53).

Distinguishing this first level of montage from the second level of montage, the implied author H.D., would seem difficult. However, the marks of H.D.’s sleight of hand within the text underscore the difference. Here the narrator claims “the film,” i.e. the events “Hilda” has been telling us of, “unrolls in my head,” an image that allows us to sit beside the narrator in the dark room, alternately aware of H.D.’s unstable present moment and absorbed in the child’s vision of history as it unspools.

The narrative sleight of hand allows us to momentarily forget that H.D., an implied author writing H.D. as a figural narrator, must compose and perform the film for us. “Fortune Teller,” the chapter following these concluding lines, is an impossible memory for H.D., telling the story of her mother’s (Mama’s) visit to a fortune-teller as a young woman. With a gratuitous series of conditionals, “Maybe Mama did think of Madame Rinaldo,” “There would be the burning-bush and plum and apple” (58-9; emphasis added), the narrator draws us into the creative aspect of remembering: “Would Mama remember this? She would remember it like a swirl of notes” (59). As the chapter progresses, the narrator moves into heterodiegetic narration, dropping the conditionals as well as the child Hilda’s voice, and expanding the character of her mother, now called Helen. The day’s events of visiting a fortune-teller serve to introduce us to Helen’s past as they trigger memories—her thwarted creativity in music and painting, her mother Mimmie warning against “too much laughter” with the phrase “There’s a black rose growing in your garden”—and, as Helen walks on “one of the old Indian tracks” away
from the fortune-teller, to introduce us further to the Moravian history surrounding the
family and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (67). Nonetheless, having taken the reader deeply
into Helen’s mind, the narrator breaks the illusion by reminding us that she is “making
up.” Returning to the use of “Mama,” the narrator states that Helen did not have a
tendency toward self-reflection or projection: “She did not look back, except in vague
generalizations … she did not stand apart from herself and see herself […]. She would
not allow herself to see herself like reflections in double-mirrors, getting smaller and
smaller” (71). It is the narrator H.D. who must and does “look back” and who sees her
self between two mirrors, “getting smaller and smaller.”

Unsettled by these strange shifts of narration and unfamiliar (because marginal)
historical allusions, the reader may choose to turn to H.D.’s “Notes” at the end of the text.
Ninety-four pages in seven sections that correspond to the seven chapters, the notes are
unnumbered but each is separated by a line space and begins with an underlined phrase
referring back to a passage in the main text, and the final typewritten line is “London—
1940-44” (278-9). The voice of the notes alternates in tone and genre, including rigorous
scholarship, creative historical fiction, conversational intimacy, and aloof autobiography.
In section two of the notes, corresponding to “Fortune Teller,” H.D. provides a history of
the male and female choir-houses and choir traditions in Bethlehem, the meaning of the
word “chor,” and then a reflection on the narrator’s composition of that chapter: “In this
reconstructed reverie, the little Helen Eugenia Wolle […]” (232). Returning to chapter
two, we find that Helen pauses (despite the narrator’s statement that Helen does not
engage in such activity) to look back to her childhood and recalls the “the pictures that
showed in the slats of the gyroscope” (72). The reader is here given an illustration of
H.D.’s method in *The Gift*, that of placing a series of pictures in a round, and setting them spinning so that we watch “the flash of the pictures which became almost continuous as the whirling gained momentum and there was no longer the interruption of the brown squares of pasteboard between the slats” (72). Clearly it is the implied H.D. that places a series of images at play across the boundaries of individual memory and across centuries, such as the presence of snakes in Helen’s, H.D.’s, and Mamalie’s memories as well as in the narrative of the Moravian founder Anna von Pahlen and the Native American Morning Star. Nonetheless, it is H.D. as a mediumistic narrator who concludes “Fortune Teller” with a wheel of images in a voice that might be Hilda’s, H.D.’s, or Mama’s, “There was a star, there was a black patch, there was a gift, there was a great swathe of carnations . . .” thus allowing us to also encounter these images as chance constellations. The trick of H.D.’s method is to both give us the effect of the gyroscope—an aesthetic pleasure in the montage, the persistence of vision—and to deconstruct the mechanism by forcing us to pause and consider the elements of the apparatus—“Slow-motion. Slower and slower” (120). Moreover, it isn’t merely the artist’s apparatus she wants us to examine, but the network of social and political forces and ideologies which she inherits and negotiates.

The standpoint of the narrator writing during the Blitz signals that memory is not retrieved fact but a creative act dependent upon the present moment. Nonetheless, in composing the intimacy of the child Hilda’s telling as well as conveying the narrator’s urgency to communicate the “Gift” in the present moment of bombing, the implied author H.D. carries readers past the bogey of “unreliability” to instead appreciate and participate in the creative act itself. The final chapter, “Morning Star,” strikingly brings the reader
into the “now” of the text’s composition, a now that has hitherto briefly interrupted the
text at intervals. Taking up a conversational yet philosophically self-reflexive style, the
narrator brings the reader into the contingencies of the moment of writing, the renewed
air raids on “January 17, 1943” (209). Facing three waves of air strikes, the narrator
reflects on the montage we have read that she has been composing for the last three years
and then switches from past, “But I was not afraid,” to present progressive tense: “It is
very quiet. My knees are trembling […] I seem to be sitting here motionless, not frozen
into another dimension but here in-time, in clock time” (221). The text then concludes
(as I will show) with a coda of three voices, the reader, the narrator, and the author, in a
space conjoining “clock time” and timeless time (223, 278).

At the first level of montage, as a narrator composing the montage text we are
reading, H.D. as figural narrator functions as a mentor for the reader (not unlike Freud
had functioned as a mentor in his sessions with H.D.) modeling a method for the reader to
utilize in working against the recurrence of war and its attendant traumas. At the second
level of montage, H.D. as author invites readers to relate to the text not as the passive
reader of memoir or fiction, but as active collaborators who write back to the text, take up
its methods, and discover their own connections. This second level of montage, the
implied author’s, is emphasized by the final section of the text, the “Notes,” in which
H.D. plays the role of “[t]he Editor herself” and thus provides a further site of
identification with readers who (as the author/Editor herself does) interpret, produce, and
enlarge upon the montage the narrator has composed (271). These two levels of montage
and the montage arrangement of the text enable H.D. to achieve a lyric narrative
dialectic: on the one hand, she is able to create the intensity of the lyric “I” or “eye” yet
disrupt its solipsism, and, on the other, she is able to incorporate the momentum of narrative yet subvert its closure. The triangulation created in the “Notes” particularly marks a new evolution of H.D.’s lyric narrative, a strategy that radically opens the text to readers’ active participation and that opens the work of art to the work of political and ethical engagement.

Critics of _The Gift_ have productively read the text with the frames of memoir, autobiography, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and history, most often attempting to define “the Gift” and thus articulate H.D.’s purpose. The meaning of the gift cannot be defined simply. Its aspect changes over the course of the text; indeed, the text itself may be seen as recording the quest for discovering the gift while being itself the gift. Robert Spoo has noted that “the gift” has multiple meanings in a “many-layered work,” one of which is that the Moravian heritage of _Unitas Fratrum_ “bequeathed to H.D. a moving counter-image to place against the shattered Europe of the 1940s” (qtd. in Augustine 4). Discovered in the skein of life-writing, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and history, the meaning of the gift will depend largely on the reader’s vantage. H.D.’s purpose is similarly subject to the reader’s standpoint. Nonetheless, the narrator’s discussion of her methods and purpose throughout the text, and H.D.’s “Notes” and reflections as author/Editor, provide material for an examination of the effects of H.D.’s montage method and its implied intent. In the last two decades, literary critics have tended to discover a strongly ethical and political purpose in _The Gift_ and take up the work of

---

7 Capitalization of “the gift” is not regular; however, it seems that H.D. does tend to capitalize the Gift when referring to the message of peace and understanding articulated but lost at _Wunden Eiland_.

426
carrying forward this purpose. This work, of attending to the proper arrangement of H.D.’s montage (undertaken by Jane Augustine and supported by others) and of expanding on the work of *The Gift* in comparative readings and interpretations, enacts the third level of montage. My interest here is how H.D.’s narrative strategies at the first and second level of montage are effective in conveying this more engaged purpose (a feminist rather than narcissist optics) than her previous experiments in lyric narrative.

The text’s evocation, interruption, and blending of genre boundaries certainly contribute to an engaged literature. *The Gift* is not a memoir and neither is it strictly fiction. In “H.D. by Delia Alton,” H.D. refers to the novel as a kind of “autobiographical fantasy” (189). Unresolved ambiguity, characteristic of dialectical vision, is key for H.D. in circumventing lyric solipsism, narrative closure, and passive reception. As Eileen Gregory and Adalaide Morris have shown, H.D.’s conflation of “individual and cultural memory,” the “swift transit from the personal to the universal” follows from the methodology of Sir James Frazer, Jane Harrison, and Freud (Morris 139). Morris holds that H.D.’s transit is not metaphoric but a “biological” theory of memory. “[N]ot a narrative strategy,” the narrator’s ability to “retrieve her mother’s and her maternal grandmother’s experiences as if they were—as in a sense they are—her own” Morris attributes to an internal “somatic event” triggered by external events that shake loose inherited, embedded memories (140). While H.D. does leave open such a magical-biological possibility, the transmission of memory is as likely based on the creative connection between the women. H.D.’s refusal to explain this transmission enables her to cultivate the mystery of either a spiritual or psychic-somatic connection—“the curious chemical constituents of biological or psychic thought-processes” (*Gift* 140)—while
simultaneously performing the creative work of transmission that involves recreating an experience in order to preserve and present it. H.D. as narrator may convince us of a cosmic “now” moment that triggers a somatic montage of inter-generational memories, but H.D. as author/Editor reminds us of the research, arrangement, and creativity involved in its composition.

Moreover, ambiguity serves H.D.’s purpose, that is, of transmitting the gift. And the gift transmitted, as readers have theorized it, is an alternative ontology to the patriarchal, militarist, and capitalist economy that reproduces war. The text’s montage of memories both exposes and is provoked by the collective trauma of the current status quo. Such a reading sees H.D.’s writing as her means “to wage peace” (Morris 138). According to Morris, the novel is the first full articulation of H.D.’s “gift economy,” as theorized by Marcel Mauss, and its “trick” is its fusion of “the sacred and secular economies held apart” in her previous work (139). Morris shows how H.D.’s opening chapters prepare the reader for an alternative economy of the gift by drawing them into an alternate optics: “by instantiating a mode of thinking that is less rational or analytic than communal, associative, and symbolic,” by drawing readers into the “gift community” with the use of “the first-person ‘we’” and the “second-person ‘you’” (140). Morris argues that H.D.’s “constantly shifting verb tenses,” her tendency to structure her sentences in clusters and aggregates rather than analytically, her rejection of similes for metaphors, and her game-like “echoic repetitions,” are the text’s means of inculcating the gift, producing in the reader a restructuring of “consciousness” (140-41).

These characteristics also signal the strategies of lyric narrative; the accumulation of meaning that takes place in H.D.’s repetitions particularly recalls her development of
fugue-writing in the 1920s. However, unlike the fugue-writing in HERmione and Palimpsest, the obsessive interiority of the earlier works is tempered here by a split first-person narrator (the child Hilda and the H.D. writing that child’s perspective during the Blitz) and an implied author (who seems at times to interrupt the narrative flow and whose presence is suggested by the comments on the narrative in the “Notes”). Each chapter opens in a new style or evokes a new genre, and requires a reorientation for the reader. Such narrative strategies interrupt a passive reading of the text and call readers to question the boundaries between genres, between monumental and personal history, between the work of art and their lived reality. Similar to Woolf’s Between the Acts, H.D.’s text dethrones the egotist “I” in favor of a lyric “I” whose boundaries are continually woven and unwoven, left partial and receptive to the reader’s own intervention. Through the narrator’s quest after the gift, H.D. embeds her lyric narrative with a counter-history of lyrics: the narrator discovers and puts in relation a number of lyric voices—anonymous, hitherto unheard, and communal. H.D. suggests that we could counter a history of war if we would recognize our inheritance of this continuous counter-history of lyrics and take up the work of creating a different ethos by making use of them.

In her introduction to the restored text, Augustine similarly reads H.D.’s purpose as writing toward peace: “this narrative of female empowerment embodies H.D.’s belief in an eternal creative feminine spirit continually manifesting as the living bearer of peace to the world” (1). The adjective “feminine” proves problematic, invoking a construction of gender according to a hierarchical binary. Augustine’s focus on the portions of The

---

8 Friedman in Penelope’s Web offers an important intertextual reading of The Gift and Trilogy. Nonetheless, the reliance on a binary rubric of gender (gynopoetics) rather than on a system of
Gift excised in the New Directions edition, many of which are “related to Moravian history and mystical religion,” leads her to emphasize the gift as essentially “spiritual,” as the end of a “religious quest,” over critics’ previous definition of the gift as essentially artistic (1, 3). Whereas Augustine stresses The Gift as a text descriptive of the recurrence of a “feminine spirit,” as “primarily the record of a religious quest” (3), Collecot’s introduction to the British edition calls attention to the interrelation of “spiritual” and “sexual politics” in the text’s activation of a feminist purpose: “a feminism that displaces hierarchies of gender, race and creed” (x). If the “all-important secret” of the gift is ultimately “the way to end war” as most critics agree (Augustine 3), then we should, nonetheless, not be surprised that war, local and global, persists. Not enough emphasis has been played on the aspect of “the way” in this formula of the gift. H.D. does not give us the end of war because she cannot. Rather, what she can do is provide us the way, or more properly, ways toward this end through a feminist “optics,” a “politics of thought or philosophy (i.e. feminism) is similarly problematic in Friedman’s otherwise persuasive reading of H.D.’s purpose: the texts form an intertextual “redemptive drama” enacting “the poet’s gyno-vision of (re)birth for a world caught in the death spiral of war” (354).

9 This reading, ironically, ultimately offers a quite pessimistic view of a “creative feminine spirit,” since its promise of peace and understanding has inevitably been thwarted and vanquished in such a history of recurrence.

10 John Xiros Cooper has made the obverse of this point in debunking the claim that books and ideas are the source of the atrocities of war, addressing critic Robert Grant’s argument (pervasive to Cooper) that “Marx and Nietzsche” cleared “the ground for the Communist and Nazi atrocities to come” (37). He reminds us that it is not “ideas, or the expression of ideas, which drive history in general and force it into its many symptomatic spasms” (38). Cooper’s argument is a welcome debunking of the tendency to blame the academy and poststructuralism for our present ills, and it provides a necessary challenge to the notion that literary criticism is itself activism. However, it is equally important not to pivot to the other extreme. Ideas and texts are a powerful force in history, Mein Kampf, an obvious example. While it is rare for one book or one philosophy to drive the pistons of history, ideas and their expression influence the network flows of power in a culture that directs the unfolding of history. Thus, understanding those ideas, becoming aware of them, is not vainglorious.
positioning” (Haraway 194). Thus, the text’s method of montage brings readers into a performance of at least two of the ways H.D. believed could lead us out of a spiral of destruction: first, the way of psychoanalytic analysis (the montage of memory) on a personal and global scale that would reveal the oppressions and injustices of history and their constitution of the present moment; second, the way of creative, collaborative work (the montage of multiple voices that produce the text).

In the years leading up to the Second World War, a surplus of books and pamphlets appeared claiming to offer “the way to end war.” *The Gift* is unlike any of these texts. With its spiritual and narrative intensity, it is not the monological didactic text characterized by a one-way direction of lecturing, preaching, or rational argument. With its pervasive interruptions and hands-on demands, it is not the realist narrative which satiates the reader by acting as a site of catharsis. Yet, it is not the avant-garde work isolated from the reader’s present reality either. In considering how *The Gift* uniquely deploys its narrative to open the reader to ways to end war, it is more helpful to turn to a third way obscured by the binary of the didactic/realist and the avant-garde/solipsistic text. H.D.’s alternative approach utilizes the methodologies of Freud’s psychoanalysis and a feminist optics of montage that parallels Benjamin’s philosophy of history as “literary montage” (N1a,8: 460).

Augustine has usefully traced the importance of Freud and psychoanalysis to *The Gift* in her reading of H.D.’s “H.D. by Delia Alton” (12-13). In this autobiographical discussion of her works, H.D. parallels her own heritage to Freud’s, noting his roots are

---

11 Augustine’s reading of *Tribute to Freud*, however, misses the similarities of Freud and H.D. in their discussions of religion, instead positing Freud as the disapproving patriarch. Claire Buck provides a more nuanced reading of their *vers-libre* relationship.
similar to those of the founder of the Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (H.D.’s hometown): Count Zinzendorf, a Lutheran clergyman and bishop in the *Unitas Fratrum* who revived the ancient church of Bohemia as a new religion in which women and love were privileged, “was an Austrian, we were called Moravians, Professor Freud was an Austrian, born as it happened in Moravia,” and the “legend of a new way of life, a Brotherhood, dedicated to peace and universal understanding, is not really such a far cry to Vienna and to Sigmund Freud” (188-89). In *The Gift*, the narrator’s tiger leaps into history (whether a moment in her childhood, her mother’s youth, or a meeting between the Native Americans and Moravians) are concerned with uncovering moments when “a new way of life,” of peace, tolerance, and fraternity, seemed possible. For H.D., Freudian psychoanalysis is one of the ways toward this alternative ontology, particularly for its attention to the unconscious. Rather than looking above for transcendence, H.D. looks within; the unconscious holds the promise of a universal connection, already within humanity’s reach, that only needs to be tapped in order to begin discovering what has blocked the way to peace and how we might proceed.

Discussing the chapter “The Secret” of *The Gift* in “H.D. by Delia Alton,” H.D. provides an overview of the child Hilda’s interest in discovering the “secret” finally disclosed from the distaff:

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania was named by Count Zinzendorf on Christmas-eve, 1741. It was one of a number of Moravian settlements, having to do with a

---

12 In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin writes that history is “the subject of a structure whose site is […] filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit].” Thus, revolution is “a tiger’s leap into the past,” as in the case of the French Revolution’s fashioning itself as a reincarnation of Rome. However, whereas the latter leap “takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution” (261).
mysterious Plan of ‘peace on earth.’ The Child, only half a ‘Moravian’ and mystified by inscriptions on some of the oldest tombstones, perceives a strange affinity in the tiny, dark creature who is her mother’s mother. Mamalie is not like anyone else. She is very old but she plays games with them and answers all her questions.

Through Mamalie, the Child traces back her connection with the Jednota in Europe with the vanished tribes of the Six Nations in America, with whom Zinzendorf had made a curious, unprecedented treaty. In fantasy or dream, the grandmother tells the story of Wunden Eiland, an actual island which was later actually and symbolically washed away in the spring-floods.

(Given the importance of the concept of “island” to H.D., it is notable that her commentary here calls our attention to the island’s actual and symbolical destruction.

One meaning of the gift of H.D.’s text is its creation of an island in the Blitz, holding open that moment in time, for readers to actually and symbolically work out the terms of peace.)

On this island, certain of the community met delegates of the Six Nations, who planned together to save the country (and the world) from further bloodshed. Through the grandmother’s submerged consciousness, runs the fear and terror of the arrow that flieth, torture and death by burning.

This terror was in our minds in London, while assembling The Gift. (188-89)

As Freud had for H.D. in analysis, Mamalie provides the child Hilda (and narrator H.D.) a means to connect with a “submerged consciousness,” a legend both personal and allegorical. As narrator in The Gift, H.D.’s primary anxieties in tracing a lineage of the gift are twofold: one, that the gift (the way to end bloodshed) will once again be lost; two, that she does not possess the gift. Augustine writes, “almost greater than [H.D.’s] fear of death is her fear of mediocrity and helplessness” (19). Thus writing, the creative act, is held up by the implied author as the way to circumvent both fears. In discovering and writing this lineage of the gift, which entails a rewriting of history and consciousness, H.D. holds open a way toward peace for future generations (but not her own); and
succeeding at this act, despite the bombs falling around the flat she shares with Bryher, becomes a testament to H.D.’s possession of the gift.

In employing an optics of memory—a montage of family portraits from a child’s perspective, of memories and imagined scenes—H.D. offers readers an entry into the work of psychoanalysis. Creative fiction could draw readers into an examination of the individual unconscious as well as the culture’s (specifically, its history of patriarchy, imperialism, and the rise of capitalism) in a way that didactic nonfiction could not. The child Hilda’s attempt to discover the lineage of the gift provides a figure for analyzing this history. The narrator H.D.’s seeming mediumistic recording of this quest as it recurs in memory provides a model of collaborative practice, that of analyst/analysand.

In “Dark Room,” Hilda charts her place in the family tree in a montage of short vignettes. She identifies Mama and grandmother Mamalie with the joys and sorrows of motherhood and sees herself as the “inheritor” of the grief for the daughters in the family who have died and lie buried in the cemetery (since the boys cannot be expected to inherit this grief), as well as of their “laughter” (37). Hilda identifies her male lineage according to the professional instruments they possess: Papa’s telescope, grandfather Papalie’s microscope. Following a montage of these scenes (which are “like small empty magic-lantern slides, stuck together,” each moment “a drop of living and eternal life, perfected there”) voiced from Hilda’s point of view, H.D. as narrator speaks: “In these flashes of flash-backs, we have the ingredients of the Gift. They had so much to give us, Papalie and old Father Weiss, as the whole town had affectionately called our grandmother’s father,” and although this gift goes back to “others before these, who went
back to the beginning of America and before America, “the Gift seemed to have passed us by. We were none of us ‘gifted,’ they would say” (42).

Hilda’s preceding montage has seemed to locate the gift in the optics of the family’s male line, optics that reveal what we otherwise could not see. Her father, an astronomer, revealed distant worlds; her grandfather, a biologist, revealed microscopic worlds: “we saw that where there is nothing, there is something” (42); Father Weiss, “the apple of God’s eye” revealed “the light of the world” in his Bible readings as did Uncle Fred in his music (41). Yet, at the margins of these sketches, in their interstices, H.D. shows us glimpses of another kind of gift, for example, Mama and Mamalie presiding over a game of anagrams, “making words out of words, but what it was, was a way of spelling words, in fact it was a spell” (42). H.D. questions why “we,” that is her generation, and particularly her self, are not deemed “gifted.” Slipping back into Hilda’s voice, she concludes, “That is why we hadn’t the Gift, because it was Mama who started being the musician and then she said she taught Uncle Fred; she gave it away, she gave the Gift to Uncle Fred, she should have waited and given the Gift to us. But there were other Gifts, it seemed” (43). From Hilda’s perspective, the Gift is not unlike a tangible possession that is passed from one to the other; however, from the perspective of H.D. as author/Editor and our own perspective in analyzing the child’s point of view, we are able to see the sexual politics that allow Uncle Fred to make use of and pursue his gift and that run “other Gifts” underground.13 A dialogue, presumably between Hilda and Mama

---

13 Uncle Fred, H.D.’s “Notes” explain, is “associated with ‘that superb achievement, the three days Bach Festival of May 23-25, 1901, which attracted the attention of musicians throughout the country and even in Europe […]’” (231). However, she insists, “I myself never attended this nor the festivals that followed. For me, personally, Uncle Fred’s musical contribution is a simple
expands the definition: “a gift isn’t just music. Artists are people who are gifted.” Mama explains, citing painters and writers as gifted, and even Aunt Belle who “was artistic.” Hilda asks, “Then can ladies be just the same as men?” and clarifies “about writing a book?” Her mother affirms that women are gifted, “lots of ladies write very good books […] like Louisa Alcott and like Harriet Beecher Stowe” (43).

Whereas the gift of providing others with a particular way of seeing seems to have been the property of men, Hilda expands the meaning of the gift by following the thread of the distaff—not only in order to be able to identify the gift in herself (i.e. if these women had an artistic gift, then she could as well), but also because in following this thread H.D. traces the kind of gift (artistic, ethical) that is most needed in her present moment of writing to counter a history of war. Following her mother’s reference to Stowe, we read Hilda’s memory of a performance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the powerful effect it has on the audience. Hilda’s description of what she saw is also a rudimentary history of racism and slavery in America. The white child’s perspective lends a poignancy to the staged images of violence and of symbolic freedom (in this performance, a freedom that emphasizes whites’ role in freeing the slaves) that prompts readers to question their own constructions of history. When escaped slaves are chased by bloodhounds, her brother Gilbert tells her it is “only a parade […] they are as free as you are” (44). H.D.’s presence as implied author behind Hilda’s associative, schoolbook framing of history implicates white Americans in the present; we are implicated in the persistent racism of a historicism which simplistically portrays the Civil War as a noble ballad” (231). As in HERmione, playing the piano is a significant analogue to H.D.’s gift as a writer. Whereas Hilda believes Mama has given Fred the musical gift, H.D. realizes her own gift of fugue-writing.
fight to end slavery, the persistent sexism that idealizes domesticity and relegates women’s gifts to those of the private sphere, and the persistent denial of the massacre of Native Americans in schoolbook narratives that celebrate an Anglo-nationalism:

The darkies tied together, were as free as I was, because our father and our Uncle Alvin had fought in the Civil War and now we all had the same flag that Betsy Ross made in a house in Philadelphia, which we have a picture of in school, with the thirteen original States […]. Our State which is Pennsylvania, is one of the thirteen original States.

Once we had a procession, too; we all waved flags when we met other children from other schools. That was for 1492, I mean it was in 1892 which made 400 years since Columbus discovered America. (44)

Although it is an amateur production for a distracted audience who seem to be primarily interested in checking the book’s scenes against the play’s representations, watching the play gives Hilda a vision of the power of art. Hilda’s description of Eliza’s flight across the river, of being aware of the simulation while simultaneously experiencing them as “real,” suggests an affinity with Brechtian theatre and allegory.

She screamed and jumped on the pieces of ice and you forgot that it wasn’t ice at all. You forgot the people around you and that you were in the theatre [….] someone laughed when the blood-hounds sniffed round the lights in front of the stage [….] I could see that they were not real terrible dogs. I could see that they were really very good dogs, yet at the same time, something else in me, that listened when Ida reads us a fairy-tale, would know that they were terrible and horrible dogs, that they would rush at Eliza and her baby which was only a big bundled-up doll or even only a bundle, and tear at her and bite her to death. (45)

In choosing the child’s point of view and incorporating “you” as the intensity of Hilda’s experience increases, H.D. draws us into the moment of discovering the power of art so that we (who are also watching the performance with Hilda and probably with our own experience of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in mind) both experience that moment of revelation and reflect upon it. As Hilda’s reflections seem to implicate, the gap between the unreality (the constructedness of the performance) and the intensified reality (almost sur-
reality) it uncovers in Stowe’s text as we experience it seem essential to the vision, the gift, the performance transmits. Hilda emphasizes this in her experience “between the acts”: “everything was the same as when we came,” she reflects, recalling Aunt Belle bringing them popcorn, yet, “everything was different. I mean, it went on even after the lights came up in the theatre” (45-46). Thinking of the university boys who “whistle and stamp” (but fall quiet when Uncle Tom dies in the last act), Hilda reasons that perhaps they don’t have the ability to “see things in themselves and then to see them as if they were a picture” (47). On the walk home, Hilda sees the parade of the play in her own street: “you kept remembering bits of it; in the light of the play itself, the details of the parade came into different perspective, everything came true—that is what it was. Everything came true. The street came true in another world” (47). In the child’s theorizing of the effect of the play, we are offered clues to the new kind of work of art that H.D. is crafting and which we are being taught to “see.” The vision of the text (Uncle Tom’s Cabin) behind the performance with its interruptions of the “real” world (the amateurish actors, the docile dogs, the university boys) comes alive in Hilda’s experience of it: something internal or unconscious (“something else in me”) responds to the work, and Hilda projects the work onto her reality (45). Similarly, the vision of The Gift behind the narrator’s performance of writing it, interrupted by the “real” world when bombs fall on London, is to come alive as the fragments H.D. assembles trigger responses in readers: our experience then of the “real” world is altered by the vision that we carry on from the work to project beside our reality.

Although Hilda knows “it was only Little Eva in a jerry-built, gold chariot,” it is also “the very dawn of art, it was the sun, the drama, the theatre, it was poetry, why, it
was music, it was folk-lore and folk-song, it was history” all realized “in our small town” (47). Thus it is through art that Hilda discovers a connection with “all the children of all the world; in Rome, in Athens, in Palestine, in Egypt, they had watched golden-chariots, they had seen black-men chained together and cruel overseers brandishing whips” (47).14 H.D.’s voice returns to the narration in a summing up that is evocative of Woolf’s *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*. She describes the connections across history and across nations of a recurring drama of oppression that “could be woven together on a standard to be carried at the head of this procession” (48). The role of art, then, is to expose that procession for what it is by making us see it, that is, by alienating us from it and breaking the boundaries between the real of the realm of art and the real of daily praxis (48).

When Hilda returns home, the drama continues to create a dual vision. She sees her parlor as it is and also that it would be like a stage if one wall was removed: “Mama was sitting at the piano and it was still Mama and yet it was Little Eva’s mother and if Uncle Fred came in and sang *Last Night there were four Marys* […] then he would be Little Eva’s father” (48). This song, the ballad of “Mary Hamilton,”

Last night there were four Marys;  
Tonight there’ll be but three.  
’Twas Mary Beaton and Mary Seaton  
And Mary Carmichael and me.

is an important intertext, one that Woolf had used in *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), as Augustine has noted (280).

14 Similarly, the intertext *The Last of the Mohicans* provides a point of departure for a vignette in H.D.’s “Notes.” Taking up where the “classic school boy-romance” leaves off, H.D. creates her own counter-narrative to “the picturesque, ritualistic trimmings so dear to the early nineteenth century romantic” (238). Commenting on a note from the Appendix of *The Last of the Mohicans*, H.D.’s own note expands into an expressive story of Chingachgook (or Tschoop) and Christian Henry, taking Tschoop’s point of view (238-42).
In the “Notes,” which also bear comparison to Woolf’s use of notes in *Three Guineas*, H.D. examines the significance of this “Celtic lyric” to Hilda and her grandmother: “It had threaded its way into her heart and into mine; it was an unspoken tradition, breathless, almost voiceless; this was something we understood together and perhaps we two only” (231). H.D. makes this “almost voiceless” lyric a connecting thread in the “Notes,” “an unspoken tradition” linking not only Hilda and Mamalie, but all the “Marys” who had been denied the possession of a gift. “If Jedediah gave Uncle Fred the whole ocean of musical-consciousness called Haydn or called Bach, well, it was something over which we had no control, we could not argue about it” (231). Nonetheless, against this history of powerlessness, stands a voiceless tradition now finding its voice in women like H.D. and Woolf, who breathe a life into this old lyric, thus making it a powerful frame for understanding the anonymous history of the past and the present.

In the chapter, H.D.’s narrator’s voice resurfaces in a self-reflexive meditation on the technique that has uncovered this memory of the lyric: “to develop single photographs or to develop long strips of continuous photographs, stored in the dark-room of memory,” to watch these scenes as well as “to watch the child watching them” (50). The difficulty lies not in “letting flow, continuous images like a moving-picture,” but in “impart[ing]” to others the secret of tapping into the endless “store of images and pictures” that is “the property of the whole race,” since admittedly she doesn’t know “how it works” (50). Yet it is necessary to attempt to impart this method, not because it is a trick motivated by a “primitive curiosity” for seeing “the wheels go round,” but because “there is a Gift waiting, someone must inherit the Gift which passed us by” (50).
Despite not knowing the secret, H.D. believes “one must, of necessity, begin with one’s own private inheritance” and recognizes the mechanism of “shock” which can either “scatter the contents of this strange camera obscura” and make one “scatter-brained or worse” or can “like an earthquake or an avalanche, uncover buried treasure,” scattering the “accumulated rubble of prescribed thinking, of inevitable social pruning and trimming of emotion and imagination” (50). According to H.D. there is no formula or road to uncovering the secret leading to one’s buried Gift; “you just stumble on it” (50). The fragments assembled in the text, as in Benjamin’s literary montage, are not unlike landmines (or “time-bombs” as H.D. would have it) waiting for the “now of recognizability” of the reader to trigger an awakening.

Claiming not to know how to impart the way to uncover the Gift (although the text itself is an attempt to impart it in modeling a montage of memory and in its interruptions of the “real” and of the implied author), H.D. calls for “[s]omeone” to discover how “secrets of thought” might “combine a new element; science and art must beget a new creative medium. Medium? Yet we must not step right over into the transcendental” (50). Putting fact and fiction into a new relationship, arranging fragments for the reader to make use of, H.D.’s text sees a way toward the Gift—a vision of peace and understanding—in the word: “A word opens a door, these are the keys […]. A word opens a door or just a few remembered facts doled out, apparently indifferently or received apparently with little or no interest, become later, a clue, a focus, a centre or node for the growing branches of ideas or imaginative speculations” (51). The growing branches are not merely H.D.’s. As the narrator emphasizes, she does not attempt to find the mechanism of these dark-room memories so that we can admire her skill at setting the
wheels spinning. Rather, it is a network that H.D. taps into, a communal unconscious store that will provide a source for collaborative creative work as well as a reorientation that allows a critique of “prescribed thinking” (50). Rather that stepping over into the “transcendental” or purely mystical, H.D.’s optics suggest Haraway’s concept of a feminist objectivity, an optics “about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway 192).

H.D.’s narrator provides a model, as in the “node” that the lyric of the four Marys becomes, while H.D.’s text provides a compendium of possible nodes, clues, or keys for the reader’s own “growing branches of ideas or imaginative speculations” (51). In the “Notes,” H.D. analyzes how the ballad has become her own nodal point. H.D. describes how she interpreted the four Marys as a child and then considers the “fourth dimensional” it later came to signify. The lyric opens the door to a “stream-of-consciousness,” a method of composing with language not unlike a fugue, H.D.’s own iteration of the Gift: “this song did make a furrow or runnel in my emotional or spiritual being that later let through a stream-of-consciousness that, in retrospect, is more precious to me than the St. Matthew Passion and the Mass in B Minor. For it was my own interpretation of the Gift, as Mamalie later in this story, reveals it to me” (232).

Later in the story proves to be chapter five, “The Secret”; preceding this important chapter that H.D. as author/Editor has drawn an arc to in her “Notes,” chapters two through four elaborate and reflect on the methodology posited in “Dark Room” and provide other fragments from childhood that the reader might connect with. Chapter two, “Fortune Teller,” is a “reconstructed reverie” of the day of Mama’s visit to a fortune-
teller as a young woman (250). It further traces the gift by revealing the “inevitable social pruning” that constrained what H.D. presents as her mother’s rich imagination and artistic gifts (50), and it further develops the network of images and citations begun in “Dark Room.” It also documents further authority (although hardly from a source considered authoritative) attesting to H.D.’s possession of the Gift, since “the fortune-teller told [Mama] that she would have a child who was gifted” (53).

Chapter three, “The Dream,” before returning to Hilda’s perspective and associative memories, opens with H.D. as narrator writing in an almost expository mode for several pages on the importance of dream and mythology and how they are to function, presumably, for both reader and writer in creating this “new creative medium” (50). These meditations on the nature of a dream implicitly also speak of the difficulties of imparting the gift artistically and seem to be a self-critique by the narrator as she composes The Gift. The chapter opens, “The dream escaping consciousness, is perceived,” but as perception dawns it escapes understanding (83). In order to “relate the dream,” “you press it carefully between the pages of the mind’s memories and associations” (83). However, this method of relating the dream “to this section of the mind, to that event in the life, to variously associated remembered moments of emotion, joy or pain” fails to capture the “emotion occasioned by the dream.” It dries up the dream and flattens the dream’s “four-dimensional” aspect, and thus what the audience receives is a mere shell or fossil (83). Since “The Dream” (a chapter containing dream elements) is literally pressed between the pages of the narrator’s “memories and associations,” this meditation prepares the reader for the surreal moments that will follow in chapter four.
It also offers a kind of literary criticism, asking the reader to consider with her the problem of how to write the dream (or vision) in such a way that it is alive for the reader rather than being merely an inert specimen. Pressing the dream in the pages of the book may not work: “Now thought wedded or welded inviolably to the word and that word the right word, may give no true expression of the emotion or of the dream-picture” (83). However, the optics of montage—of the image internalized and projected so that it “come[s] true” in the reader’s reality—may: “The dream-picture focused and projected by the mind, may perhaps achieve something of the character of a magic lantern slide and may ‘come true’ in the projection” (83). Allusive of Proust’s “Overture,” H.D. similarly draws the reader into a self-reflexive meditation on the retrieval (and composition of) memory. However, the fragments of memory or dream that are to be revivified through The Gift cannot be limited to the individual, but must “drag in a whole deracinated epoch” (Between History 9). H.D.’s methodology insists on audience collaboration and uses incompleteness to counter the paralysis of aura: “to ‘come true,’ it must not aim at the outline of a masterpiece, it must not set up Gothic cathedrals or Brunelleschi doors,” but must capture “the very essence of life, of growth, of the process of growing. Therefore we must not strive to compose the picture, this is no formal garden with clipped-yew and paved-walks between box-hedges” (83).

Likewise, Benjamin chose not the frame of a Gothic cathedral, but the examples of literature as a “montage in the feuilleton” and the outmoded rubble and detritus of the previous century’s “arcade and intérieurs” for compiling his “residues of a dream world” (Arcades “Exposé of 1935” 13). In the Arcades Project, Benjamin similarly sets out to create a paradigm of “[t]he realization of dream elements, in the course of waking,” the
“dialectical thinking” that is “the organ of historical awakening” (13). Just as H.D. as narrator seeks out the buried gift and the forces that have prevented the realization of its promise, Benjamin looks to the utopian hopes in Fourier’s arcades as a “wish image,” “images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old” (4). In the wish image, the imagination is deflected “back upon the primal past,” tapping into a “primal history [Urgeschicte]—that is, to elements of a classless society,” that has left its “trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions” (4-5). H.D.’s theorization of the “dream-picture” at the threshold of waking strikingly recalls Benjamin’s dialectical image, the “historical object of interpretation: that which, under the divinatory gaze of the collector, is taken up into the collector’s own particular time and place, thereby throwing a pointed light on what has been” (Eiland and McLaughlin xii). Moreover, the dialectical image, functioning like a fragment in his literary montage, is “made use of,” is “actualized” in the reader’s particular “now of recognizability”: “[t]he historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it” (xii). In developing a methodology for (and that is articulated in) their works, both H.D. and Benjamin emphasize the need to account for the reader’s activation, interpretation, or use. The picture cannot be composed, meaning cannot be sutured, the garden cannot be staked; ways must be opened, but collecting and making meaning must be left to the reader’s creative effort. If the word is a door, a way, it must be left open to the emotions and ideas of the reader to cross the threshold. H.D.’s narrator continues, “[t]he dream, the memory, the unexpected related memories must be allowed to sway backward and forward, as if the sheet or screen upon which they are
projected, blows and is rippled in the wind or whatever emotion or idea is entering a door, left open” (84).

“The Dream” gradually returns to Hilda’s perspective, illuminating significant memories of her childhood, such as preparations for Christmas, that suggest these intimate, everyday rituals are evidence of a mythology in “actuality,” one linked to previous cultures’ mythologies (84). These scenes enable H.D. to actualize Freud’s theorization of the childhood of the race. For example, while Hilda tells of creating a putz for under the tree, the narrator returns to explain, “God had made a Child and we children in return now made God; we created Him as He created us, we created Him as children will, out of odds and ends; like magpies” (89). What is of particular interest in the technique of these chapters is H.D.’s skill in evoking the tumult of emotions and sensations of childhood while circumventing a nostalgic enjoyment of them by the interruptions of the narrator’s retrospective distance, which sways us backward and forward so that we both feel the emotion of the moment and critically examine it—whether under the rubric of ideology, mythology, or psychoanalysis.

Chapter four, “Because One is Happy,” follows a similar trajectory, from H.D. speaking to us as a narrator reflecting on the work (literally interrupting to dwell on a moment of memory, “Slow-motion. Slower and slower”) to a near total return to Hilda’s perspective (120). However, a shift in tone is marked by the framing of the chapter with scenes of the writer’s present moment of threatened annihilation as well as the more fragmented, insistently associative unfolding of the memories that follow. Whereas the previous chapters have included a bass note of menace heard intermittently, here it becomes a dominant motif, expressed in the opening line: “There was a time-bomb that
had neatly nosed its way under the pavement edge, less than two minutes’ walk from my

door” (109). The short vignette of the time-bomb—“We did not know the monster was

there, until it appeared on show, in the hotel-lobby before whose door it had landed”—

provides an introductory allegory for H.D.’s subsequent meditation on how this threat,

whether a time-bomb waiting in their midst or a random bomb from the sky, effects one’s

consciousness.\(^{15}\) The shock of possible annihilation initiates a lyric subjectivity and
draws the reader into a present tense now:

The silt of time is dynamited to powder, along with the walls of the house

on the corner; while one’s own walls still shake with the reverberation, there is

that solemn pause; time is wiped away. In three minutes or in three seconds, we

gain what no amount of critical research or analytical probing could give us […]

we shrink, we become time-less and are impersonalized because we are really one

of thousands and thousands who are equally facing a fact, the possibility, at any

given second, of complete physical annihilation. (109)

It is indeed a “time-bomb,” destroying time, destroying the barriers of personality,

connecting the “I” to the “we” across the borders of author and reader, of nations, of the

borders of the real and allegorical: “There are no national boundaries, I do not think, ‘that

is a German who dropped that bomb.’ It is something rather out of our Doré Bible, the

burning of this or that city, the locusts and plagues of Egypt […]. I do not think in

journalistic truisms, in terms of nation against nation” (109).

H.D.’s lyric standpoint, while bypassing nationalism, does offer the reader the

side of “Light” in an epic battle: “Light and Darkness have unfurled their banners,” but

there is a caveat that modifies this old epic binary in an attempt to open an alternative to

\(^{15}\) Fuchs has discussed the importance of the image of this “time-bomb”; her focus is on the

“bomb” and its connections to the literal violence lurking in memory and in H.D.’s present (93).
The chapter, with its images of a snake and nightmare, is frequently read for Freudian symbolism,
and Fuchs provides a necessary corrective since H.D. herself saw Freud’s work as essentially the
work of history and politics.
the usual mythos, “and though we take our place beside the legions of Light, we must never forget how each one of us (through inertia, through indifference, through ignorance) is, in part, responsible for the world-calamity” (110). Here H.D. implicitly returns to the difficulty of writing an engaged work of art that would break through inertia, indifference, and ignorance. It seems, she reflects, that only in the moment when catastrophe is realized and “we are forced to face up to the final realities” are we “able to stabilize our purpose, to affirm in positive and concrete terms, our debt to the past and our responsibility to the future” (110). H.D. then captures the experience of being under that catastrophic moment; in doing so, she places her readers into the moment of that “I” while simultaneously allowing them to analyze her reaction to that moment, what she calls her “trick” (110).

When the “planes swoop low” and the noise becomes intolerable, like a rabbit in the woods, her body becomes paralyzed and regains “the primitive instincts of the forest animal,” becoming surrounded by “a sort of protective ‘invisibility’” (110). The “trick” is the mind’s ascent, where reality is rediscovered in allegory or myth:

My body is paralysed, ‘frozen.’ But the mind, has its wings. The trick works again. It works every time now. Fate out of an old Myth is beside me, Life is a very real thing, Death a personified Entity. I am on my own, as at the beginning. I am safe. Now exaltation rises like sap in a tree. I am happy. (110)

The “peculiar situation” and the mind’s ascent have enabled two peculiar vantages. First, it has enabled the eclipse of the “I,” a crossing of the “edge of the forest” marking the boundary of personalities (110). Second, whereas the drowning man is afforded the infamous montage of his life only once, the repeated shocks allow a repeated “glimpse of the unrolling film or the tapestry which fate or our unconscious had woven for us” (110).
The destruction of London becomes thus the unreal, and “we were able, night after night, to pass out of the unrealities and the chaos of night-battle, and see clear” (111). H.D. writes of her “mind at those moments,” if it had “one regret, it was that I might not be able to bear witness to this truth […]. I wanted to say, ‘when things become unbearable, a door swings open or a window’” (111). The door that swings open, then, is both access to impersonality, the “we,” as well as to a lyric perspective of the “unrolling film or the tapestry” of the richness of creative life (110). The exaltation, the happiness H.D. attests to is not finally a patriotic spirit of the marshaled forces of “Light,” nor is it a religious affirmation of a hereafter that is glimpsed in the moment of death, nor is it a solitary epiphany, a “personal secret” (111). H.D.’s frustration is that while she can “share terror,” it “seems I could not share joy with everyone. It was a universal joy” (111). That is, she cannot share the vision of peace and understanding of the Gift, glimpsed in the door swung open when facing final realities. Importantly, the montage that follows quickly undermines any reading of the secret of the gift that would align it with institutionalized religion:

it was God or Saint Nicholas or the Little Mermaid after she had turned into a Spirit of the Air, or the Holy Ghost if it comes to that, or a wooden Doll with a blue painted-robe, called Mary, under the Christmas-tree. Indoors, it was the Christmas-tree certainly; outdoors, the whole forest of trees. It was a forest with the wind swaying giant branches and the branches brushed across the roof of a low hut. (111)

The images are personal nodal points for H.D., as they may also be in different ways for her readers, but they are also “impersonalized,” they “flash” a different meaning (111). The Gift that H.D. is concerned to bear witness to is, in part, a vantage, not transcendent
but immanent, of the incredible web of creation which we are a part of and its beauty glimpsed in the “the pause” (111).

Certainly, this is hardly the menacing bass note I had previously described. Moreover, it seems to risk escapism as well as the complacency of affirmative art. Yet, the self-reflexivity framing this vision of the gift (which cannot be given in itself—only the way to it opened) warns the reader against both escapism and satiety.\footnote{This moment is markedly similar to the poet’s witnessing a tree flowering in the rubble of the Blitz in H.D.’s “Tribute to the Angels” in Trilogy. The poet finds that no art can capture the experience, “music could do nothing with it” (84), and further, attempting to describe the moment again, and as if being prodded, the poet explains:

and then . . . music? O, what I meant by music when I said music, was—

music sets up ladders, it makes us invisible,

it sets us apart, it lets us escape (85-6)} Further, the fragmented scenes that follow trace the “monster” that has neatly nosed its way in and lies at the heart of the culture’s meta-narratives (114). Just as Hilda attempts to find out the meaning of a “Nightmare” (its picture has been cut out of their copy of Simple Science), H.D. takes up the task of facing the maddening recurrence of the monsters of the nightmare of history—patriarchy, nationalism, and militarism: “History repeats itself or life advances in a spiral” (248). Thus, the door swung open offers the gift of a vision of one’s life in creative connectivity, but also a vision of the structures and forces which oppose such a vision. Dreaming of a snake that bites her mouth, the narrator reflects, it is as if by “some unconscious process, my dream had left open a door, not to my own memories alone, but to memories of the race” (114). Having been “stung on the mouth by the Python,” that is, having internalized a culture of war since childhood, can “one
[...] utter words other than poisonous?” (114-5). The analysis of this unconscious process, the discovery of the poison we have ingested and that we speak seems a necessary step toward a new way of speaking. The memories of family and childhood that follow in chapter four and six, on the one hand, expose the subtle presence of a poison in the patriarchal divisions of the family’s interaction, and, on the other, posit an alternative in the scenes of fraternal interaction among the siblings.

The next chapter, “The Secret,” sways between fantasy, dream, and recollection. Chapter five does not open with H.D.’s commentary or a reference to the present moment of writing. Rather, Hilda speaks in the present tense, describing the setting: she is lying in bed, while outside family and visitors watch the sky on a hot summer’s night. Hilda joins her maternal grandmother, Mamalie, in the latter’s bedroom. Papa is away with Eric “at the Observatory, looking for his double-stars. The double-stars stay together but they go round one another like big suns” (147). While Mamalie is led into the distant past by Hilda’s asking after the meaning of the word “shooting-star,” Hilda’s concerns continue in the present regarding the possible danger of such stars: despite Eric’s reassurances, “sometimes I wonder if they are able to tell if really a shooting-star will not fall down and fall on us and fall on the house and burn us all to death” (148). In contrast to the menace of the falling star, or the bombs dropping on London, H.D. posits the model of the double-stars (which stay together, and presumably thus stay in the sky) in Hilda’s collaboration with Mamalie’s act of remembering and in the collaboration of the Moravians and Native Americans in the tale that Mamalie relates. During their conversation, Mamalie mistakes Hilda for her aunts and mother, calling her “Laura,” “Helen,” “Lucy,” and “Aggie.” Hilda readily plays whatever part Mamalie projects on
her, desiring to stay with Mamalie, believing “she is going to talk about the shooting-star in a different way, that isn’t gravitation” (151). As Mamalie searches for matches to light a candle, Hilda prompts her with their location; “you told me to remind you, if you forgot” (150). When Mamalie states, “I forgot all about it” (151), what “it” refers to is unclear (the matches? the story of her discovery of the Secret? the pact between the Moravians and the Native Americans?). The statement then seems an affirmation of Hilda’s role in opening the door to remembrance. The shooting-star and its related fears of burning have drawn them together, and it seems that Hilda’s reminding Mamalie of the matches provokes the telling of the forgotten scenes that follow.

Mamalie’s fear of fire is revealed as not a fear for her own life, rather “there were the papers. Christian [her husband] had left the Secret with me. I was afraid the Secret would be lost” (151). “For the first time,” Hilda becomes interested in “who we all are,” but more specifically in her maternal lineage, her great-grandmother Mary, as she again recalls The Four Marys which H.D.’s “Notes” has marked as part of a voiceless “unspoken tradition” (152, 231). Later in their conversation, when Hilda recalls Mamalie asking her to sing, she reflects on the women’s lyrics as triggers of memory: “when she played the songs, it all came back. Songs bring things back” (173). Gradually, and with

17 Fuchs’s description of this scene is significant: “The narrator’s recollections involve a single night in childhood when her maternal grandmother, in a trancelike state, turned her granddaughter into a second-person listener as an integral part of the testimony process” (95; emphasis added). It is of course the implied author who creates this scene that turns Mamalie into a speaker and Hilda into a listener, as well as H.D. as narrator creating and preserving these memories. Fuchs strangely elides H.D.’s interruption (in her presence in the notes and in crafting both Hilda’s and Mamalie’s speech) of the seamlessness of this memory. Fuchs notes the detailed historical research that is “slipped into the grandmother’s subjective account and performed as her own words” (97). The disjunction between the character of Mamalie and the lines H.D. gives her to speak are, I would argue, a conscious decision; as in Brecht’s theory, the interruption of illusion serves the purpose of interrupting the reader’s passive reception.
Hilda’s prompting, Mamalie seems to return to 1841, when she discovered “the Secret” by deciphering with her husband music encoding records that described a ceremony between Native Americans and Moravians in 1741. Mamalie even relives the moment of that meeting in 1741, having become “one with the Wunden Eiland initiates” in the process of “trying over and putting together the indicated rhythms” in the coded score (169). Evocative of a call and response structure, Hilda’s role in the unfolding of Mamalie’s narrative is in asking questions: she takes up a word or theme from Mamalie’s story and asks it in her part as Aggie or Lucy, which provokes a further unfolding of the theme. The reader is even drawn to consider the fugue-like unfolding of these embedded stories when Hilda interrupts Mamalie’s narrative. Mamalie has been retelling the events of 1741, concluding with the Native American Shooting-Star’s affirmation of the nascent secret that had never been acted on; Hilda continues, “Shooting-star? We are back at the beginning. This is just a bed-room,” and this return to story-time is followed by a restatement of the themes Hilda finds interwoven between her story and Mamalie’s (169). Asking and debating questions in order to discover interconnection proves a way toward the creation of the Gift—“David Zeisberger [the Moravian] asked a question which had never been asked before”; “to answer a question that the warriors had long been debating”—and is evocative of the analyst/analysand model H.D. posits (164-65). Hilda later reflects, “It all started with the shooting-star and my asking questions, but the question that David Zeisberger asked (Mamalie said) might have changed the course of history, so it is important, after all, sometimes to ask questions” (173).

Collaboration and mutual exchange is emphasized on every level: between the Native American Morning Star and the Moravian Anna von Pahlen, between Mamalie
and her husband Christian, and between Mamalie and Hilda. Morris has described the gift economy of their exchange: “as Mamalie works back into her vision, she projects onto Hilda the identities of those who surrounded her in the past, identities Hilda in turn takes up and plays out to keep Mamalie in her trance” (141). These revelatory moments of collaboration, however, are each ultimately thwarted. The promise made at *Wunden Island* is broken when Moravian officials reject and burn the records of the ceremony and when renegade Native Americans burn the Moravian settlement at *Gnadenhuetten*. After Mamalie and her husband discover and decode the Secret of the tentative peace in the forgotten records, the church claims the palimpsest is witchcraft and must not be kept, Mamalie’s husband dies, and Mamalie has “burnt” her gift of music “all up in an hour or so of rapture” while interpreting the Secret (168). The collaboration of Mamalie and Hilda is forgotten as well, that is, until brought back by the bombs falling on London, when H.D. realizes “the message that had been conveyed to me” is also at risk of being “lost” in the “now” of 1941 (213). The hundred year cycle, 1741, 1841, 1941, provides an over-convenient correspondence, mapping a recurring moment in history when “a secret, that properly directed, might have changed the course of history, might have lifted the dark wings of evil from the whole world” (168). If the moment has been lost at each recurrence of the “secret,” how might the trajectory be altered in 1941? The emphasis seems to fall on H.D.’s phrase “properly directed” (168). If the Secret is a recognition of the shared interest in peace and understanding between peoples and nations, then the Gift involves decoding and transmitting the Secret. Success lies in drawing the other in as co-collaborator; for H.D., it is the collaboration of reader and author that is essential in altering the trajectory of the future. As Morris concludes, H.D.’s text “holds the reader
responsible for continuing the relay of power and peace that constitutes the secret of the
gift” (143).

Given that H.D. chose not to publish _The Gift_ in the “now” of the crisis, the
precise dating of 1941 in the story seems strategic. As bombs fall on London, the “now”
in which the work of peace, understanding, and a different trajectory of history might be
accomplished has already passed. It is only in an after, when a relative peace makes
possible the collaborative work and debate proposed, that the Gift can be transmitted.
Benjamin’s “Definitions of basic historical concepts,” which are indeed redefinitions,
apply to H.D.’s deferral for a reader who will take up the text with a retrospective
vantage: “Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo
threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken” (N10,2: 474).
Catastrophe, in Benjamin’s rubric, is not the incendiary or the burning building, but its
relationship to the moment that surfaces long before the moment of destruction when the
opportunity for a different future was open but not acted upon. The critical moment is
not the pamphlet issued at zero hour, but the intervals between wars when the status quo
is unquestioned. Progress is not the natural course of humanity, but contingent on
engaged consideration and action.

The threat that H.D.’s writing might itself be consumed by fire, which we see at
the first level of montage, lends the text an urgency and interest for the subsequent reader
who will approach the text in Benjamin’s “critical moment,” not unlike Mamalie and her
husband in discovering the forgotten scrolls. However, H.D.’s presence as an
author/Editor at the second level of montage provides a necessary intervention that
prevents us from dismissing the story of the Gift, the mystical accoutrements of the
Secret, as a hysterical grasping for redemption in a time of threatened annihilation.

Within the chapter, H.D.’s retrospective voice interrupts the narrative, teasingly unsettles its “reliability,” and thus defuses such a reading. Referring to Mamalie’s story, Hilda (although H.D.’s presence comes to the fore) suggests, “Maybe even, I made it up alone there on the bed while Mamalie was sitting at the window, maybe Mamalie didn’t even say anything at all” (175), and further, “Maybe it was just that I was dreaming something, because I was afraid a shooting-star might swish out of the sky and fall on the house and burn us all up. Maybe, it was because I was afraid of being burnt up that I made Mamalie in the dream, say she wasn’t just afraid of being burnt up” (176). On the one hand, H.D. as author/Editor provides a detailed research trail in the “Notes” placing Mamalie’s story of the meeting of the Native Americans and Moravians for peace in the “real.” She locates the actors and verifies their identities, beguilingly looks up definitions for us (“To begin with, Chamber’s English Dictionary says antinomianism is […]” [263]), and comments on the chapter itself from a remove, sometimes as a literary critic, and at others as an author: “This drawing of lots is an important later motive of The Gift” (261); “Anyhow, it is the child’s story and the grandmother’s Gift, so we will trust to their intuition and check up their references when we are able, whether their dates and the historical dates agree or not” (267).

On the other hand, she undermines our ability to passively read the text as “real,” thus leading us to question and participate in the weaving of fact and fiction—not merely in The Gift but in our experience of reality and history. H.D.’s presence at the second level of montage allows her to speak to the reader as a collaborator in the interval. She
comments on the “the body of the narrative” as if entering a dialogue about the methodology of the materials or analyzing psychoanalytic data:

In assembling these chapters of *The Gift* during, before and after the worst days of the 1941 Blitz, I let the story tell itself or the child tell it for me. [...] I tried to keep “myself” out of this, and if the sub-conscious bubbled up with some unexpected finding from the depth, I accepted this finding as part of the texture of the narrative and have so far, in going over these chapters (to-day is July 2nd 1944) changed very little. Instead of tidying up the body of the narrative, I thought it better to let things stand as they were (as the story was written under the stress of danger and great emotion) and where indicated, confirm certain statements or enlarge on them in these notes. (257)

Paradoxically, by creating this author/Editor voice of 1944 in the “Notes,” H.D. achieves a degree of anonymity—“I tried to keep ‘myself’ out of this”—that invites the reader’s analytic and creative work.

Fuchs analyzes the text’s composition according to “three distinct air strikes in 1941, 1943, and 1944” and accordingly identifies “three related but separate discourses” (81, 83).18 The third discourse, according to Fuchs, is H.D.’s “section entitled ‘Notes,’ [which] remained unfinished until mid-1944” (83). Here “H.D. evolves out of the role of autobiographical narrator and subject. Foreseeing an end to the war but once again personally at risk, she now adopts the multiple roles of editor, researcher, and historian, effectively closing off and distancing herself from her autobiographical project” (83). Although Fuchs’s argument is helpful in emphasizing how “[f]oreseeing an end of war” influences H.D.’s choices, it is important to acknowledge a less chronological plotting of

---

18 Fuchs attributes the inconsistent narrating voice, fragmentation, and memories of America overlaid with menacing images in the first discourse, chapters one through six, to H.D.’s displacement from witnessing the erratic bombing of that period (83). Chapter seven, “Morning Star,” marks a new discourse to Fuchs: “It directly and immediately informs us of its witnessing function because it establishes itself as testimony of the bombing attack of January 1943 before it shifts to recollected scenes of childhood” (83).
the reader’s experience of the text, since H.D.’s identity has been refracted over these multiple roles throughout the book.

Begun in 1940, the “Notes” are an essential element of the interruptive montage technique of The Gift. Although Fuchs reads the notes as a “closing section”: “as The Gift’s eighth and final chapter” (105), Augustine argues that the “Notes” serve (at least) three functions as the reader progresses through the text. First, the “Notes” “clarify and authenticate names and places alluded to in the main text, stressing their historical accuracy and relevance”; second, they verify that peace between the Moravians and Native Americans “actually existed” because of the Moravians’ efforts; and third, the “Notes” “enlarge the scope of The Gift by providing further insight into the evolution of H.D.’s creative processes and the interrelations of this memoir with her other writings of the wartime period. While the method of the ‘Notes’ appears in part scholarly, quoting sources, it is also largely dictated by free association, as in psychoanalysis” (15). The “Notes” particularly enable the conflation of the time of the text and the time of the reader. Since H.D. was finishing her manuscript after D-Day, when the blinders of war were removed from her horizons and peace again seemed possible, she would have been particularly aware of her readers’ location in a post-war context. Recognizing that readers would likely enter into The Gift in a period of “after” in which the hoped-for changes had not come about and were not as pressing, H.D.’s persona as implied author/Editor commenting on the narrative as a narrative creates a paradoxical intimacy. In acknowledging the “now” of the reader, H.D.’s “Notes” manages to intersperse the reader’s “now” within the “now” of the text. I would further contend that the “Notes” model “an orientation toward the future and H.D.’s active, productive role in it” (Fuchs
106) not only for H.D., but also for her readers. Just as readers must decide how they will “make use” of what H.D. provides in the “Notes” in progressing through *The Gift*, readers must decide how they will “make use” of “the gift” in progressing through the realities of their present lives.

Despite Fuchs’s insistence that the reader should read the “Notes” as a final chapter, readers are much more likely to read them in a less uniform way, either turning back and forth as they progress through chapters, or alternating at the ends and beginnings of chapters. Indeed, the lack of regular footnote numbers in the text encourages readers to take up a much more active role in producing the text. Readers are left to choose their own paths, and H.D.’s unsettling of the “truth” of the text further gives readers the responsibility of creating meaning in interpreting and writing history. Whereas Fuchs describes the section as a “self-portrait, one that projects authority and control” due to much of the “Notes” being written after D-Day (105), I would hasten to emphasize that the “authority” of the voice is that of an author/Editor (not an authoritarian) commenting on a work and entering into a dialogue (the semblance of intimacy) with her collaborators—her readers. As in Woolf’s use of notes in *Three Guineas*, historical and scholarly authority is given a twist in the author’s commentary as readers are invited to make use of the past in an unauthorized way. Rather than imposing a corrected history or shoring up her authority, H.D. proposes the model of collaboration, of double-stars, in which any posited construction of “truth” is subjected to the pull of another point of view. In the “Notes” for “The Dream,” H.D. as author/Editor performs the wobble, or dialectic, that is the axis of her narrative construct—a prosaic view of reality and a poetic vision of peace:
The earth wobbles as it goes round the sun. Indeed it wobbles very much and in a strange fashion. This is June 29, 1944 and I started these notes or biographical memories back in the early days of the Battle of Britain, way back in the early forties. That is a long time ago. Now, this minute, the flying-bomb is on the way—now this minute, there is a distant crash and we are safe for this minute.

[...]

The earth wobbles as it goes round the sun. Comfort and peace came to me, in recalling the strange mystical adventures of Count Zinzendorf and in a later chapter, I go further into the spiritual or psychic sub-strata of the religious inheritance of the race, as it flowered in a personal revelation—constructed or re-invoked as between the child and the grandmother. (255).

This section begins with a statement of fact—“The earth wobbles as it goes round the sun” and a description of the threat immanent in the present moment, and as it comes round to a restatement of that fact, it reveals another side of the moment.

The final chapter, “Morning Star,” provides yet another double-star model. H.D. describes her jolt out of the “trick” of creative work and escape into “mystical adventures” in the renewed bombing of 1943. She also reflects on the presence of her partner Bryher who creates for H.D. a calm center in the storm, enabling her to carry on, literally, and with *The Gift*. The chapter opens with a repetition of the line that closes the previous chapter, a chapter which is entirely Hilda’s recollection of her father’s unexplained accident at a tram station when she was a child. The chapter opens: “‘What is a concussion, Mr. Evans?’ I said”—but this unspooling of the memory is interrupted by a concussion of another sort—“But I could not hear what he said because there was a roar and then the floor sank” (209). Having not “had any big raids for some time,” the renewed attack “was ironical and bitter-strange because this was January 17, 1943 and we had done all that” (209). H.D. recalls the burned papers and fear of burning Mamalie spoke of, and this seems no longer to matter as “now I would be burnt” (209). However,
Bryher has already taken charge, shutting the doors, moving them into the hall, and keeping H.D. in her chair with a calm, factual dialogue about the guns. As they sit, H.D.’s thoughts are pinned to their immediate surroundings and oddities such as leaving her handkerchief in the other room; she feels, “I had lost my trick of getting out, of being out of it” (211). Unnerved, H.D. thinks of how she has been able, lying on her bed in her room, to travel great distances in time and space while “the terror was at its height”: “I could let images flow through me and I could understand Anna von Phalen,” and Mamalie who told her, “There was a Promise and there was a Gift, but the Promise it seems, was broken and the Gift it seems, was lost” (212-3). As the opening of the chapter signaled, the sequence has been broken:

All this I saw running in luminous sequence but this I could not write down, though I sketched the preliminary chapters. In the other room, my bedroom, were the chapters, but how could I see and be and live and endure these passionate and terrible hours of hovering between life and death, and at the same time, write about them? (213).

This question functions doubly: as the character reflecting on her struggle, that is the figural H.D. in the narrative as an artist in wartime, as well as the author/Editor reflecting on the methodology of *The Gift*. As a technique, montage enables H.D. to negotiate the paradox discussed at the opening of the text—how to capture the living essence of the

---

This is indeed a striking chapter that becomes “an intimate scene of two women surviving a catastrophe” (Fuchs 101). According to Fuchs, the renewed attacks disable H.D.’s escape into “authorial fantasies” (as Suzette Henke writes) or “myth and sacred history” (as Morris writes), and thus enable “a more straightforward approach” (101). Since H.D. is so successful in crafting this self-reflexive scene of the “narrator-in-the-act-of-giving-testimony” (Fuchs 102), it is easy to lose sight of the sleight of hand the author H.D. achieves. Fuchs quotes H.D. as finally being able to cross the “chasm that divides time from time-out-of-time” (102), eliding the fact that the “time” of *The Gift* is always “out-of-time,” that is, the realm of the work of art. Consequently, in successfully blurring the lines of narrator and author, the created time of the work and the time past of the author who has written, H.D. as author does bridge the chasm. For us, the time of the work, in timeless time, becomes the time of the reader.
Gift in prose and communicate it to another. Montage also enables H.D. to capture the paradox of the moment(s) of writing—the real material difficulties and interruptions of war, that which the Promise of the Gift is meant to disrupt.

In this final chapter, the Gift is again at risk of being lost, not merely in the flames of an incendiary bomb that would consume the “preliminary chapters” but also in a sudden failing of the narrator’s ability to carry on the Gift. Since we have already read the chapters H.D. fears for, our interest is not for the suspense of whether or not our narrator’s pages survive, but rather in the effects of the bombing and the means by which she carries on. “I had thought, if I could follow the clue through the labyrinth of associated memories,” it might have “worked out,” “[b]ut I only remembered that I had had this power, the power had gone now, I was a middle-aged woman, shattered by fears of tension and terror and now I sat in a chair and only remembered that I had been caught up in a vision of power and of peace” (214). H.D. has lost the dialectic of immunity and vulnerability essential to the creative act: “I was unprotected. I had no steel-helmet and I had no mother-of-pearl shell around me. I was broken open, the mollusk or oyster or clam that was my perceptive abstract self or soul, had neither the super-human reasoning nor the human habitation” (215). Lacking the “Gift of Vision,” she cannot “visualize civilization” as anything but a cycle of destruction (214-15). Bryher’s presence, however, intervenes as a source of protection and human habitation. At the other’s calming words, H.D. thinks, “I would meet her half-way. […] Now that I saw that Bryher was accepting the fury, we could accept the thing together”; Bryher would “go on” as well as the “child […] asking questions” (216-17). However, now H.D. is pitched into a nausea at having to accept yet another “thing together,” of enduring what “had all
happened before” (216-17). She is sickened by her gratitude for a quiet night, sickened even by “[her] own high exalted level, this climbing up onto a cloud, a dimension out of time. I hated the thought of *Abide with me*” (217). Having “gone round and round,” and she now “made the full circle,” the “words of the hymns were trite,” the mystical prophetic line is not a “neat Asiatic metaphor but an actuality” (217).

Nonetheless, this disillusionment, collapsing the transcendent poetic and the nauseating actual, proves the necessary breakthrough into the vision of the Gift. Having “touched rock-bottom,” having gone “down under the wave,” H.D. finds, as the third and final wave of aircraft pass, “I was not drowning though in a sense I had drown; I had gone down, been submerged by the wave of memories and terrors, repressed since the age of ten and long before, but with the terrors, I had found the joys, too” (219). The shock of the actual terrors has provoked the flow of memories and the creative work of recovering a buried, alternate history that moves toward peace and understanding. The journey back and forth between in-time and out-of-time has enabled a rewriting of the past with a critical optic that captures both “the terrors” and “the joys.” However, disillusionment in foreseeing a failure of a future “[c]ritical moment” when “the status quo threatens to be preserved” (Benjamin N10,2: 474) proves the third crucial turn in transmitting the vision of the Gift. The reader must not be allowed to passively follow the narrator’s struggle, or view the panorama of her memories and inherited histories as an immobile frieze or finished production to be passively consumed. The second remove of an author/Editor (located with the reader in a war and postwar vantage) must work to sustain the interruptions of the real, the fragmentary nature of the work (that is labor) of
art, and position the reader as a collaborator, another body gathering light and heat from the remains H.D. leaves to be seen.

Bryher’s presence, at once iconic (“like a statue”) and intimate (H.D. focuses on “the folded cloth of her skirt, pulled too tight across her knees”), creates an interior space that is nonetheless dynamic, likened to a ship’s cabin, that allows the figural H.D. to separate the storm “outside” from “inside one’s head,” and thus to voyage on (220-1). Her presence allows H.D. to realize an after: “The reverberations and the still sinister whirr of the enemy propellers overhead, would become one with all the past, and this moment was already past and Bryher sitting there was long familiar” (221). The moment passed, H.D.’s narrative transitions, after a line space, to present tense: “I seem to be sitting here motionless, not frozen into another dimension but here in-time, in clock-time, ‘I wonder what time it is,’ I say to Bryher” (221). As the tension lapses, H.D. reflects, “They told us that gravity or something of that sort would keep the stars from falling. But their wisdom and their detachment, hadn’t kept the stars from falling” (221). “They,” may refer to her father and Eric at the observatory and thus a dominant patriarchal discourse, or to a pure detachment of the transcendent lyric; in either case, the implication is that another wisdom, one that is implicated with the other and not detached, must be tried. As the narrator H.D. wakes into the present, readers are also to “wonder what time it is,” to question the interpretive lenses we have inherited.

Donna Haraway identifies two “‘god-tricks’ promising vision from everywhere and nowhere,” and these intolerable optics—an optics of totalization or relativism—are those that H.D. here also negotiates: the fathers’ optics, a totalizing objectivity of traditional Western discourse (“the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God,
whose eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference”) as well as a false
“feminine” optics, the relativist objectivity of being “simultaneously in all, or wholly in
any, of the privileged (subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class”
(Haraway 194-5). In taking up the vision of the Gift, H.D. must expose the falsity of
“monotheistic” objectivity handed down by a patriarchal tradition, yet cannot claim a
pluralist vision with the authority to speak for all others. Instead, in exposing the limits
of her own vision and meeting the other half-way, H.D. as narrator and author/Editor
models the optics of a feminist objectivity:

The topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The
knowing self is partial in all its guises […]; it is always constructed and stitched
together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together
without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity. (Haraway 195)

That is, an objectivity of “partial connection” (195). H.D.’s turn to montage, an optics
that refracts her own subjectivity, invites her reader to take up this third way between
totalization and relativism.

If the “earth” is not to remain “a wounded island as we swing round the sun”
(223), then Morning Star and Anna von Phalen as they exchange names, Bryher and H.D.
as they affirm one another, the reader and the author/Editor as they enter into
collaboration in screening the past, are our models—double-stars—that might alter the
trajectory of history. The final lines of The Gift restate this theme in three voices. First,
there is the voice of H.D. as narrator weaving together the fact and fiction of her
memories while Bryher speaks as if in answer to H.D.’s interior discourse. This voice
joins H.D.’s poetic work and the prosaic moment: “it is Anna, Hannah or Grace who is
answering. Now they call together in one voice . . . the sound accumulates, gathers sound
‘It’s the all-clear,’ says Bryher. ‘Yes,’ I say” (223). Second, in the “Notes,” there is the voice of the author/Editor, who cites the final lines of Thomas Doolittel’s “The Epistle to the Reader” from his *A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper* (1697) “with three Dialogues, for more full information of the weak, in the Nature and Love of this Sacrement”:

> In all which if thou findest any thing profitable to they Soul, and tending to promote the work of Grace in thy Heart . . . give God the Glory; but where thou findest any thing that favoureth of the weakness of the Author, do not censure, but pray for him, who is willing, according to his own Talent he hath received from the Lord, to further thee thy way to Heaven and Eternal Life. (277-8).

H.D.’s coda, calling upon the voice of the reader to enter critically into the work of the Author and thus take up the work of the Promise of the Gift, the work toward peace and understanding, opens a way toward “Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken” (Benjamin N10,2: 474).

### 7.3 The Gift and Between the Acts: Walter Benjamin’s Literary Montage

Lyric and narrative, music and image, intimacy and impersonality, these are the key experimental dialectics Virginia Woolf had developed throughout the previous two decades and marshaled in *Between the Acts*. The novel begins on a summer’s night in June 1939 and unfolds the day of a pageant held annually at Pointz Hall, the Oliver family’s house in a small village in England. Scenes of varying lengths marked by space breaks structure the text. Its many layers include a version of the history of England in the pageant written and directed by Miss La Trobe, the dynamics of the generations of the Oliver family and their London visitors as well as the diverse villagers who both perform and are the audience of the pageant, and the remote village itself with its prehistoric
vestiges set against the encroaching World War. I argue that Woolf’s new emphasis on and use of a tradition of the lyric in addition to the variety of techniques—interior discourse, dialogue, quotation, montage—used in her lyrical prose pushed the text neither toward obscurity nor a nostalgic tradition, but toward a wider audience. The importance of the audience to Woolf in writing the novel is clear in the two levels of montage that I examine here. The first level of montage is the self-reflexive scene of the artist, Miss La Trobe’s use of the technique in her pageant. The second level of montage is Woolf’s use of the technique to structure the text and the unique relationship she thus creates with her readers.

Why turn to the technique of montage for a text that has at its center a pageant? Critics such as Sallie Sears and Daniel Ferrer have productively commented on the novel as a “play within a play” and Woolf’s deployment of the reader in a creative act. However, as Makiko Minow-Pinkney has noted in analyzing Woolf’s use of collage, drama is only one of many genres in the text. Moreover, the pageant that La Trobe stages transgresses the generic conventions of “the play.” As Mark Hussey has noted, Woolf

20 Catherine Wiley’s close reading of Miss La Trobe’s play examines it as an example of Brecht’s epic theatre, and both Sandra D. Shattuck and Herbert Marder discuss the relationship of Greek and epic theatre in relation to La Trobe’s play. David McWhirter, drawing on Bakhtin, discusses the reader of Woolf’s text as La Trobe’s audience, but fails to account for Woolf’s narrator as well as the presence of the implied author, as Karin Westman points out (340). Westman’s “History as Drama: Towards a Feminist Materialist Historiography” lays out a persuasive thesis; relying on “Brecht’s own writings,” she “offers some provisional conclusions about how the ‘alienation effect’ of Woolf’s dramatic narratives reveals the ideological networks of British patriarchal culture and thereby furthers a feminist historiography” (335). My approach is similar to Westman in emphasizing the need to look beyond the play to the narrative strategies of the novel and Woolf’s narrator; given the space constraints of Westman’s piece and its focus on Orlando as well she is only able to offer a provocative outline of her conclusions. I will pursue some of her unanswered questions, but differ in focusing not on Brecht’s own writings, but Benjamin’s conceptual use of epic theatre.
seems to describe the form of *Between the Acts* in her 1927 essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art” which foresaw an “unnamed variety of the novel,” a prose work that would have “many of the characteristics of poetry” and would be “dramatic, yet not a play” (*CE* 2: 228, 224). This description in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” fits *The Waves*, the lyrical novel Woolf was then drafting, as well as *Between the Acts*, which she began working on in April 1938. In both, Woolf creates in her prose new possibilities for the lyric, a lyric mode, as well as a new sense of the dramatic, writing towards “a revolutionary work of art” (Lehmann 44). My analysis of montage in *Between the Acts* thus turns to Walter Benjamin’s discussion of “epic theatre” as rooted in the “procedure of montage” (234).

Benjamin, in “The Author as Producer” (1934), discusses the revolutionary work of art by confronting the two seeming incompatible demands the poet then faced: that the work have the “correct political tendency” and that the work be of “quality” (221). His claim, one that would no doubt appeal to writers such as Woolf who were struggling with these demands, is that “the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct” (221). Examining the current context of the writer’s conditions of production, Benjamin finds that literary works with both tendencies utilize recent changes in audiences and modes of production. As a result of the press, film, and “polytechnic education,” “the conventional distinction between

---

21 Benjamin gave “The Author as Producer” as an address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris on April 27, 1934. The essay begins to outline the analysis of Brecht’s theatre that Benjamin would expand on in “What is Epic Theatre?” published in *Mass und Wort* in 1939. During the mid- to late thirties, Benjamin “defended a revolutionary avant-garde already eclipsed (and in some cases about to be liquidated) by the Stalinist norms of ‘bourgeois realism’ and ‘literary heritage’ officially prescribed in 1934” in the “Expressionism controversy” of the following year, when the hopes and limitations of the Popular Front politics were debated (Rabinbach xxxiv).
author and public,” upheld by bourgeois tradition, increasingly disappears and “the reader is at all times ready to become a writer” (225). According to Benjamin, the revolutionary work is not aimed at simply accelerating the decay of his or her own tower of privilege nor is it the closed circuit of propaganda. If the left-wing intelligentsia is to produce a truly revolutionary work of art, then the writer’s work must have two qualities: “first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal” (233). These two qualities are the subject and form of H.D.’s The Gift and are, literally, at center stage in Woolf’s Between the Acts. Benjamin explains that the works that improve their apparatus are those that overthrow the generic barriers that “fetter the production of intellectuals,” whether “the barrier between writing and image” or between “orchestral music” and “the collaboration of the word” (230-31). Literary forms are recast in “entering the growing, molten mass” that includes “photography and music” and “film and radio” (231, 234). By making use of these hybrid forms and technological developments, the new literary alloy can educate, rather than merely preach or entertain, and thus leave open a space for the reader’s assumption of a creative position.

Like Woolf, Benjamin sees the “class struggle” as intertwined with the struggle of new forms in art: “You find it confirmed that only the literarization of all the conditions of life provides a correct understanding of the extent of this melting-down process, just as the state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which—more or less perfectly—it is accomplished” (231). The increasing heat of the class struggle enables a recasting of literary form; new literary forms are able to more readily embrace “all the conditions of life” in incorporating the methods of other genres and mediums. Benjamin’s affirmative vision of this dissolution of conventional barriers, which might be
unexpected from writers identified with the intelligentsia whose “dais” was to be transformed (“What is Epic Theater?” 154), echoes Woolf’s argument in “A Letter to a Young Poet” and “The Leaning Tower.” It is through such crucible work that “[t]he author as producer discovers—in discovering his solidarity with the proletariat—simultaneously his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern him,” such as the photographer, composer, and director (230). After 1931, Woolf increasingly discovers this solidarity, reflecting on how it vexes her artist’s inclination to withdraw into depths of unconscious reflection. As Patricia Laurence argues, Woolf adopts a position during the war of anonymity in the “We”—“‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted,” she notes in her diary (5: 135)—that is enlarged by “the common voice” and “the unifying forces of the media” (227). Woolf “questions, collapses, and redefines” the distinctions between a “public, communal voice” and “private, human, artist’s voice,” as she is “forced during this time to seek a new balance between the external and the internal and to create a bridge between fiction and history, journalism and art, the private and the public” (Laurence 229). This effort to both revolutionize the apparatus of her writing and to open it to the proletariat is difficult enough, but the

---

22 Rather than recognizing Benjamin’s own work to create a writerly text—a collage or montage that moves the audience into an active role—Perloff quotes Benjamin’s description of the shifting relationship “between author and public” which “is about to lose its basic character. . . . At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. (Ill 232)” as evidence of Benjamin’s “elitist contempt for the world of public discourse” and a “thinly veiled scorn for ‘that sort of thing’ [populism]” (73). In “Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin: Selling Out(Siders),” Hankins’s comparison of this “sort of thing” in Benjamin’s work with Woolf’s similar critical analysis of the author as producer shows how both use the “neo-flaneur” figure in a way that precisely aligns with Perloff’s description of collage: “As the mode of detachment and readherence, of graft and citation, collage inevitably undermines the authority of the individual self, the ‘signature’ of the poet or painter” (Perloff 76). While Benjamin and Woolf both felt ambivalent about their positions as artist-intellectuals, neither shied from confronting that social structure and pushing for outsider positions that could dismantle (their own) hierarchical authority.
attendant conditions which provoke the effort, the crucible of war, make it particularly trying at times, as Woolf vents in her diary: “Oh how torturing life in common is! like trying to drink a cup of tea & always its dashed from one” (5: 239).

Benjamin’s example of such a work that both teaches and turns consumers into producers, “that is, readers or spectators into collaborators,” is “Brecht’s epic theater” (233). Benjamin’s analysis of Brecht’s concept provides a frame for analyzing how, through lyric narrative prose works recast by the influences of film, music, and drama, Woolf’s and H.D.’s use of montage turns readers into collaborators. Recounting Brecht’s theories, Benjamin explains that epic theatre “had to portray situations, rather than develop plots” and thus operates according to “the principle of interruption” (234). This principle, familiar from “film and radio, press and photography” is essentially “the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted” (234). Benjamin makes an important distinction between the function of interruption in the case of epic theatre compared with conventional film and radio: “interruption here has not the character of a stimulant but an organizing function” (235). The processes of montage, particularly in Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts, “make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements” with the hope that at “the end […] of the experiment” the “situation appears—a situation that, in this or that form, is always ours [the audience’s]” (Benjamin 235). Yet this appearance, this recognition, occurs at a critical distance, creating the “astonishment” of discovery rather than the satiety of naturalism, and thus restoring “the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure [leading to the satiety of mere novelty] to a human event” (235). In Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts, this space, a critical distance across which the flash
of recognition or meaning occurs, is essential and generated by the possibilities of montage.

Brecht theorizes this space in his concept of alienation, or defamiliarization. Benjamin writes that Brecht’s epic theatre revolutionizes the apparatus of drama in making use of it as a laboratory to “expose what is present […] Present-day man,” in deploying “the gestus,” the human situation or gesture made quotable (235). Explaining the purpose of the epic theatre, which is to alienate the public “in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives,” Benjamin notes, “there is no better start for thinking than laughter […] convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul” (236). It should be emphasized that Woolf’s and H.D.’s texts, which indeed utilize montage as an organizing function in order to achieve the sense of intimate recognition seen from a critical distance, certainly are undertaken with a levity and joy in humanity. Laughter is indeed a prominent theme in The Gift, a dangerous inheritance from H.D.’s mother and Mamalie, a strategy for undercutting the narrator’s authority, and the essence of the Gift: “It was laughing, laughing all the time” (169). As Brecht emphasized, the best intentions cannot be brought to fruition if the work does not stimulate a sense of beauty, joy, or laughter in the audience. Not a scorning, pessimistic, or purely negative laughter, which is characteristic of late modernist works such as Djuana Barnes and Wyndham Lewis, their laughter is directed by an ethic or care for the aesthetic vision they would reveal of the “Present-day” and for the audience in whom they hope to awaken a convulsion toward creation.
In “What is Epic Theater?” (1939), Benjamin’s attraction to the procedure of montage is explained further, and his analysis is suggestive of the motives of Woolf and H.D. in turning to montage. Here, Benjamin identifies the concept as originated by Brecht in his “poetic practice”; epic theatre desires an audience in a state of active reception, an audience that “appears as a collective, and this differentiates it from the reader, who is alone with his text” (147). Can Brecht’s concept be relevant then to the texts of Benjamin, Woolf, and H.D., which are nearly always encountered, at least physically, “alone”? On the one hand, the dynamics of audience, text, author, and performer that Benjamin examines and which are applicable to the written text’s dynamics of audience, text, author, and narrator or implied author suggest so. On the other, their written texts, and Benjamin implies as much in his analysis, achieve an intimacy that epic theater cannot. While we tend to encounter these texts in intellectual communities engaged in dialogues concerning the insight the texts offer, they also inspire an intimacy between implied author and reader at the third level of montage that epic theatre cannot. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s outline of the processes of montage in epic theatre lays the ground for examining the first and second levels of montage in Woolf’s novel.

The author, thinking of the audience, arranges the form and content of the epic theatre so that the audience checks the action against “the basis of its own experience” at crucial points, according to Benjamin (147). The form (“the style of acting, the placards and captions”) and content (preferably “an old story” or “historical incidents”) of epic theatre aims at purging the apparatus of the “sensational” (148). These choices—including techniques of documentary, interruption, and montage to layer the present with
an alternative, fragmentary rendering of the past—are those made in Benjamin’s plans for a “political literary criticism” in *The Arcades Project* as well as in Woolf’s and H.D.’s writing during the war (“Author” 223). In choosing the margins of historical incidents or viewing them from off-center, the epic theatre is able to reject plot, the tragic hero, and “can cover the greatest spans of time” (149). Benjamin recalls that in the French classical theatre, “persons of rank” were placed on “armchairs on the open stage,” a concept that seems foreign to us: “it seem[s] inappropriate to attach to the action on the stage a nonparticipating third party as a dispassionate observer or ‘thinker’” (149). Nonetheless, in Benjamin’s analysis, this is precisely the new kind of “hero of the drama,” the “thinker, or even the wise man” that is wanted (149). This inclusion of a “third party” is pertinent to H.D.’s and Woolf’s narrative strategies, specifically the complex relationship of reader and implied author created by incorporating third-person narration, an impersonal perspective, and direct addresses to the reader. In both novels, we read of a kind of epic theatre being staged—for example, H.D.’s retelling of Hilda’s experience of the performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Woolf’s producer La Trobe staging a pageant of the History of England—and are moreover invited to reflect on the performance as a performance, to examine how it effects the audience, how the audience contributes, and how the performed text relates to their reality. The implied author invites the reader as a third party “on stage”; we enter as both participants and observers. Benjamin describes one mechanism of this relationship thusly: “instead of identifying with the characters,” as we would in empathizing “with the stirring fate of the hero” in Aristotelian catharsis, “the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function” (150). Accordingly, the performance must be accessible to both the masses and
the bourgeoisie, without, however, allowing the audience to be passive (as they are in naturalist reproductions or spectacle). Rather, the performance “should be mounted artistically in a pellucid manner,” and Benjamin further emphasizes that such a manner is “anything but artless” and indeed “presupposes artistic sophistication and acumen on the part of the director” (148).

The art of montage, then, is the key for moving the audience toward the desired state of interaction with the text and for communicating the author’s dual vision of humanity in its potential and its present realities. Benjamin sees the fundamental structuring device of montage, interruption, extending “far beyond the sphere of art,” as indeed “the basis of quotation” (151). The montage techniques of Benjamin’s, Woolf’s, and H.D.’s texts function not only to make “gestures quotable” (the gestures found in the interstices of the everyday rather than those of the tragic hero) but also to deploy quotation in a new way. This technique demands audiences discover meaning in the quotation according to his or her standpoint, since it lacks supporting didactic commentary and appears in a provocative constellation with other quotations and contexts. Such an experimental deployment of quotation enables the “spectator […] to become a participant” (152). Significantly, rather than relying on Brecht’s term “alienation” for the effect of montage, Benjamin inevitably replaces it with or places alongside it “discovery.” For Woolf, Benjamin, and H.D., the parallactic effects of montage move toward a revelatory vision. Throughout Between the Acts, the audience—both the figural audience within Woolf’s novel and the audience reading Woolf’s novel—is “astonished” to “discover the conditions of life,” the “circumstances under which they function” (Benjamin 130). This is most apparent in the moment of standstill when the
pageant reveals at the end of its experiment, in fragments of mirrors, the circumstances
and conditions constituting “now. Ourselves” (BTA 186).

7.4 Between the Acts: The Epic in the Intervals

Before La Trobe’s pageant begins well over half way through Between the Acts, the reader has been immersed in a tour de force of Woolf’s montage method. The first act of Woolf’s novel creates a sense of the implied author, the experimental text in media res, and the very important part of the reader/audience; as Bartholomew Oliver explains, we learn that “Our part” in the pageant “is to be the audience. And a very important part too” (58). This triumvirate of implied-author, lyric narrative text, and reader corresponds to the novel’s subsequent figural director, pageant, and audience, so that the reader’s experience of the latter leads to a reconsideration of his or her very important role as an active reader of Woolf’s novel. The opening pages of Between the Acts initiate this complex relationship of implied author and reader by suggesting the presence of a director, glimpsed just between the lines, not unlike the villagers’ view of La Trobe between the trees, a “swarthy, sturdy” woman, who uses “rather strong language,” has a “passion for getting things up,” a cleverness in bringing out peoples’ gifts, and the ability to span and choose from “the whole of English literature” in composing her pageant (58-9). Woolf’s use of counterpoint in the first paragraphs creates a humorous, although menacing to some, conceit. It is as if a small group sits immobile on a darkened stage,

---

23 In her previous typescripts of the opening, Woolf includes references to Miss La Trobe, the intriguing outsider, as a possible topic of discussion (Pointz Hall 249-51). By shifting the artist’s appearance until much later in the novel, Woolf activates without placating the reader’s desire for an alternative to the dualities presented in the first act.
that of Pointz Hall, with nature as a sardonic audience to the absurd trivialities of the conversation of the Olivers and their guests, while we as an audience of readers are positioned further back from the stage, perhaps standing beside the clever author-producer looking on in the dark.24 The novel opens, “It was a summer’s night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden,” a beat, “about the cesspool” (3). As Benjamin noted, “there is no better start for thinking than laughter” (236). Mrs. Haines, the “goosefaced” “wife of the gentleman farmer” chatters against the silence of nature, speaking “affectedly” about the poor choice of conversation matter. Nature provides a counterpoint: “Then there was silence; and a cow coughed” (3). Woolf allows Mrs. Haines to go on for several sentences, although not in quoted dialogue, about her family’s pedigree in the village; and, again, we hear nature’s counterpoint: “A bird chuckled outside” (3).

Although we are apt to chuckle with this bird, as readers, we are not allowed to align ourselves with it. When Mrs. Haines suggests “A nightingale?,” a member of the party presumably corrects, “nightingales didn’t come so far north,” and the narrator then finally identifies the bird: “It was a daylight bird, chuckling over the substance and succulence of the day, over worms, snails, grit, even in sleep” (3). As Woolf’s audience, readers are triangulated: we laugh with the daylight bird at the peckings and stagnation of

---

24 This reading runs counter to a view of Woolf narrating “from an Ozymandian distance,” a “monarch of all she surveys,” a reading that extends her isolation at Monks House to the characters of her novel: “The isolation within Pointz Hall brings little cause for rejoicing,” allowing her characters none of “the pleasures of solitude, only the pain”; this leads Woolf to “reflect a world without room for the values of faith, communion, and civilization” (Knowles 187, 190). This reading rightly notes the dystopian threat present throughout the text, but, as in Adorno’s negative dialectics, it cannot account for the presence of hope, beauty, or a future that Ruotolo and others find in the text. The Brechtian concept of distance, or Hal Foster’s notion of running-room, more adequately describes the author’s use of distance in constructing her narrator.
the village gentry, yet when we are removed from the cesspool conversation to the bird’s standpoint, the effect throws us back on our difference from the natural world. Woolf is hardly subtle in making us feel the ridiculousness of the Mrs. Haines types (she is likened to a goose gobbling over tasty bits in the gutter), enabling the reader to feel some ascendancy, merited or not. However, when Woolf cuts to her bird, which does register what the Mrs. Haines’s fail to register—“the substance and succulence of the day”—we are suddenly rejected from that alliance as well, in that the bird’s dreams of “worms, snails, grit” bring us to earth again (3). Woolf’s readers are thus suspended, left outside of either standpoint, and perhaps we cough nervously at the possibility that we are subject to the bird’s chuckling as well.

Bart Oliver, introduced as “Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired,” then models Woolf’s use of montage to conjoin extreme perspectives across time and space. The site of the cesspool was “on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the

---

25 The condensing of the earlier typescript’s extensive lyric, “Prayer to the Night Bird,” is a remarkable example of Woolf’s rigorous montage method and her careful elimination of the narrative threads that might alleviate the reader’s anxiety by explaining or commenting on the juxtapositions:

Not to the nightingale, the amorous, the expressive, do we turn [in this crisis;] praying to be released from the herring and the council houses; for they sing of death, the nightingales; but to some little anonymous bird of daylight, who, thinking of sleep, has woken; a sociable fowl; who, shuffled in the angle of the apple tree, can’t sleep; his wings want stretching; hence the sudden bubble; like a child asking to be let down from the very high chair when the grown-up people are boring; round the table [on and on.] Off he flits, wise and honest bird; not afraid of saying, snail shells, pebbles, little bits of parsley; worms; slugs; slime! They have, he chuckles and chatters, their substance and succulence, even at midnight. Oh sensible and ironic bird, to whom there is not convention of graves, nor knowledge of “my” family and “yours; nor need of cesspools […] (Pointz Hall 34) In her revision, Woolf deletes the romantic lyric, in which we are overwhelmed by the author’s prodigious orchestration, and replaces it with the modernist lyric mode.
Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they had ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (4). The daylight bird’s chuckle is also in counterpoint to the marks of the palimpsest of a history of war that man has scratched out upon what is now England, for this generation’s entry on that overwritten manuscript will be a cesspool. With this opening, Woolf has led her readers to feel a profound discomfort—we hardly wish to identify with the village gentry, we are drawn to yet alienated by the perspective of nature (indifferent and giving the lie to a history of progress), we are made culpable for a history recorded in the imperialist scarring of the land, and we are made even more trivial in comparison to that relatively short history in being identified with the generation of the cesspool.

Nonetheless, it is the bird, in a way, that relieves us, as its laughter points us to the figure beside us in the dark, the implied author, and the creative principle her text endorses. Isa, Mr. Oliver’s daughter-in-law and wife of Giles, enters the scene “like a swan swimming its way,” “wearing a dressing-gown with faded peacocks” (4). If the suggestion of “nightingales” and thus poetry seems ridiculous in Mrs. Haines’s mouth, both birds and poetry seem to stream from Isa. An embodiment of Eros, Isa is thinking of “the gentleman farmer, Rupert Haines.” Even though their three meetings have been prosaic, “his ravaged face” provides her with “mystery” and “his silence, passion,” fuel for her imagination and poetry (5).26 Moreover, Isa’s appearance inspires “the old man,” Mr. Oliver, to quote Byron, words which “made two rings” that Isa feels floating “herself

---

26 Critics have usefully compared Woolf’s novel to Freud’s Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, which Woolf read as she was writing Between the Acts. Ruotolo has ventured that even “If Woolf never read Beyond the Pleasure Principle, she nevertheless appears equally responsive to the idea of a death wish” (213). Specifically, Ruotolo is describing Isa’s succumbing to her love of Giles, whose ego will consume hers.
and Haines, like two swans down stream” (5). However, Haines’s “breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed” and Isa’s feet are likewise “entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker” (5). This movement—from stagnation in the prosaic (thanatos) to the fertilizing of the poetic (eros) to a moment of tension in which a third perspective holds the moment for consideration—is paradigmatic. Throughout the novel, Woolf utilizes counterpoint to triangulate the moment in order to discover the conditions of our dialectics in both a micro and macrocosmic sense. In this instance, the poetic music of Isa’s emotion is countered by the harsh notes of her prosaic reality—the dirty duckweed of Mrs. Haines, who feels herself excluded from “the emotion circling them,” waiting as if “for the strain of an organ to die out before leaving church” and to then destroy the emotion “as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly” during the drive home (5-6).

Although Isa suggests an alternative of a gift economy (the emotion she creates in her poetic reverie circulates among the others, and Bart responds in kind), I want to emphasize that Isa is not simply the reader’s looked-for counterpart. Woolf is steadfast in holding Isa up for critique for her susceptibility to domination in a patriarchal culture. Nonetheless, as Lucia Ruotolo argues in The Interrupted Moment, Isa and La Trobe do offer the reader glimpses of the possibility of a future society not governed by hierarchy or capitalist greed but one created through a “mutual accommodation” in their creative risks and refusals to conform to convention (230). For example, in this first scene, Isa initially refuses the rules of social politeness that front a male-centered heterosexual economy that makes women commodities of their husbands and competitors against each other. When Mrs. Haines rises to leave, Isa “sat on”: “Mrs. Haines glared at her out of goose-like eyes, gobbling, ‘Please, Mrs. Giles Oliver, do me the kindness to recognize
my existence. . . ’ which she was forced to do, rising at last from her chair” (6).

Ultimately Isa does compromise and conform, and her poetry is written in secret and confined to an unmarked text. As readers, we are left in a critically ambivalent position, unable to quite identify with the characters or to reject them as objects of satire. We are led to identify more comfortably with the author producing the text than its characters, and as the third party upon the stage we are thus able to desire and examine the requisites of “a new plot” (215).

While I am emphasizing the implied author’s importance in the relationship the reader forms with the text, Woolf hardly becomes an imposing or controlling presence. Rather, her use of montage is undertaken with such subtle skill that its subjects seem to evolve their own method of articulation, one not dictated by Woolf’s subjectivity, allowing the reader to take the seat of the producer. Indeed, Woolf’s first textually marked cut, which follows Isa’s rising for the Haines’s departure and is indicated by a line space in the text, shifts to a camera eye’s perspective. Rather than simply allowing the narrator to describe or comment on the Oliver family’s background and to then introduce Bartholomew’s sister, the widowed Lucy Swithin, Woolf creates a montage of images from a subject-less point of view—all eye rather than “I.” As in “Time Passes” and the interludes of The Waves, this “world seen without a self” revolves around a house (The Waves 287). The passive voice emphasizes this perspective: “Pointz Hall was seen in the light of an early summer morning to be a middle-sized house” (6). The montage cuts from a tableau of the house, to the perspective of a car driving past, to a grim underworld-scape, to a long shot that moves within the interior of the home from object to object, until finally arriving at Lucy’s bedroom. First, the “homely” but desirable
house is described, testified to by the observations of unnamed people “[d]riving past” who ask “the chauffeur: ‘Who lives there?’” The chauffeur doesn’t know because the Olivers are relative newcomers, there only a century, unlike “the old families who had all intermarried, and lay in their deaths intertwisted, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall” (7). The scene leaps in a kind of match cut from the twisted roots in the cemetery to the staircase buried in the back of the house where a “portrait” hangs of “an ancestress of sorts.” Rather than tracing the Olivers’ “hundred and twenty years” history, we observe the remains of the servants’ history: “The butler had been a soldier; had married a lady’s maid; and, under a glass case there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo” (7).

Besides providing a match cut to Lucy’s bedroom, where she hears “[t]he church clock str[ike] eight times,” this stopped watch signals Woolf’s recurrent countering of clock time, formally and thematically (7). Indeed, the watch stopped by a bullet provides a striking image of the “interrupted moment” which Ruotolo theorizes so persuasively as the necessary “catalyst,” the points of access of “the liberating space of unguarded moments” (238) wherein a new plot, of “new words and […] new methods” (TG 143) can displace the repetitions of patriarchal, militaristic society. Ruotolo argues

---

27 This is also an important image to Benjamin, whose notion of the present includes the flow of time and a present in which “time stands still and has come to a stop” (“Theses” 262). Describing inherited “historical consciousness,” Benjamin illustrates the difference between a measurement of clock time and calendar time, and the association of revolution with stopped time with three lines of verse from the July revolution which describe the experience of the first evening of fighting when “the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris” (262).
that Woolf’s “aesthetic of interruption,”\(^{28}\) one that evolved throughout her career in breaking the “derived sequences of art and politics,” critiques not merely “patriarchal hierarchy” or “bourgeois Victorianism,” but questions “the validity of social structure itself, which is to say, those hierarchical assumptions that underlie most Western theories of governance” (231).

Lucy Swithin is worshipful of the hegemonic order (represented by her dedication to the church and childlike submission to her brother Bart’s rationalism) yet succeeds perhaps better than any of the other characters in breaking free of that order in her flights of fancy. We first see Lucy reading her favorite book “an Outline of History,” a title suggestive of Lucy’s naïve immersion in a text outlining a Western Truth until we find that Lucy is actually interested in prehistory—a vision of England not divided from the continent and populated by all manner of “barking monsters” for forefathers (8). Lucy, firmly fixed in the confines of an inherited patriarchal edifice, has nonetheless cultivated the ability to hold two visions simultaneously, a supremely adapted “divided glance” (9). It takes her “five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself,” the maid entered with the breakfast tray, “from the leather-covered grunting monster” of the text (9). This humorous use of superimposition is further complicated by the perspective of the maid (although it isn’t clear whether the narrator is giving Grace’s view of Lucy, or Lucy’s awareness of Grace’s view): “Naturally, [Lucy] jumped as Grace put the tray down and said: ‘Good morning, Ma’am.’ ‘Batty,’ Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in the

\(^{28}\) In a footnote, Ruotolo notes the similarity of the interruptions which are accidental yet paradoxically fundamental to the aesthetic of La Trobe’s play to “Benjamin’s remarks regarding Bertolt Brecht” (220).
swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron” (9). As readers we too become adepts of the divided glance, able to see the half-Grace, half-dinosaur of Lucy’s poetic flight clattering into prosaic reality, and able to hold Grace’s point of view of “Batty,” and Lucy’s view of a maid who knows her as “Batty” simultaneously. The birdsong and sight of a thrush on the lawn tempts Lucy back into “her imaginative reconstruction of the past,” but she is given pause by the memory of her mother who had rebuked her: “she [Lucy] was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future; or sidelong down corridors and alleys; but she remembered her mother” (9). The “but” marking her internalization of her mother’s rebuke, the check on Lucy’s creative endeavor, closes down not only Lucy’s tendency of “increasing the bounds of the moment” but also the expansion and scoping propensities of Woolf’s narrative so that we shift from a poetic, plural vision of Lucy to an abruptly materialist, Arnold Bennett portrait: “So she sat down to morning tea, like any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast” (10).

Woolf’s montage, given to “increasing the bounds of the moment,” leads the reader to focus on and experience multiple frames of reference and multiple experiences of time. Her aesthetic of interruption enables the reader to assume an ambivalent critical vantage, while the poetic or musical counterpoint of her montage tempers the shock of the interruption and thus enables the reader to collaborate and discover pleasure in the creative act. Rather than using montage to effect a “shock” for shock’s sake, or out of a destructive impulse, Woolf’s dialectic is one of opening and deconstructing the moment, on the one hand, and inducing an alternative, creative mode, on the other. Joan W. Scott,
addressing the uses of poststructuralist theory for a feminist theory concerned with social practice, has argued for a feminist theory that can “break the conceptual hold” of hierarchical Western systems of thought and that can “enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting on) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them” (358). In theorizing such a “critical feminist position,” not unlike Haraway’s feminist optics, Scott identifies two interrelated, necessary moves, which are also emblematic of the two moves Woolf and Benjamin both make and draw attention to in their texts:

The first is the systematic criticism of the operations of categorical difference, the exposure of the kinds of exclusions and inclusions—the hierarchies—it constructs, and a refusal of their ultimate ‘truth.’ A refusal, however, not in the name of an equality that implies sameness or identity, but rather (and this is the second move) in the name of an equality that rests on differences—differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition. (369)

*Between the Acts* exposes a series of binary oppositions—male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, upper and lower class, militarism and pacifism, civilized and savage—and the ideological systems of power in which they are hierarchically ordered—patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, nationalism. Like Freud in his analysis of the role of the individual ego in considering mass psychology in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Woolf moves beyond revealing the categorical differences structuring these systems to examine the more complex site of the individual’s interaction with the group—his or her emotions, the ambiguous workings of the life and death drives, the interface of the instinctual and the institutional. Woolf thus disrupts a reader’s tendency toward passive reception in a state of distraction and awakens and encourages the reader’s critical faculty. While in Freud’s analysis the critical faculty of the
individual ego may be a defense against mass behavior viewed as social regressions, it is
only potentially so. Woolf, like Freud and Benjamin, remind us that the critical faculty
may work to preserve the status quo perpetuating repressive institutions. Thus Woolf’s
text deploys a process of deconstruction for an audience placed in a position of critical
reception, yet also provides the audience the ground for creating alternatives.

Acknowledging that the critical faculty is both a final defense against and a source of
totalitarian brutality, the difficult choice Woolf and Benjamin make in their use of
montage is a refusal to dictate the creative alternative their works foster. The task of
these texts is to awaken the reader’s critical faculty, provide them with the tools and
material to discover the conditions in which they live, and to induce them to participate in
the production of alternative conditions. As Scott implicitly argues in articulating the two
necessary qualities of a critical feminist position, to dictate those conditions would be to
effect the same closed circuit their critique exposes.

Scott’s dissatisfaction with the apparatus of theory inherited from Western
tradition for analysis and for formulating social practice recalls Benjamin’s thesis in “The
Author as Producer,” that the work that would have the correct political and literary
tendencies must have two qualities: “first to induce other producers to produce, and
second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal” (233). It is my claim that Woolf’s
novel evidences both tendencies. Woolf’s more comprehensive use of montage provokes
her readers to take up a critical-creative role and offers itself as an improved apparatus.

Moreover, Woolf invites the reader to participate in a kind of literary critical theory of
her efforts through the inclusion of an artist, La Trobe, improving her apparatus (the
pageant play) via a montage method so that her audience members become participants
rather than spectators. The literary allusions throughout the novel and in La Trobe’s pageant serve to locate this “improved apparatus” and the reader-participant in relation to a web of literary history—from the earliest anonymous lyrics of England “A child new born” (77) to Woolf’s modernist contemporaries T.S. Eliot and E.M. Forster, from Woolf’s first novel The Voyage Out to this her last.

Leading up to La Trobe’s pageant, Woolf’s text marshals her established talents—the crafting of the moment of being for the reader, the intimacy of the interior portrait, the weaving of themes and voices in a musical fugue—in a new way, incorporating the swifter techniques of film montage, figuring shifts in reception occasioned by radio and newspaper, and transgressing barriers of genre more deliberately. Laurence has adroitly described the novel as a “a textual fugue of war,” which “takes the rhythm of dialectic of Three Guineas further and transforms it into a contrapuntal rhythm, a metasyntactical backdrop to Miss La Trobe’s pageant of England” (239). It is a new polyphony for Woolf, according to Laurence, one that includes the media and daily sounds of war: “in this novel, the contraries of journalism and art, the public and the private, the external and the internal, are collapsed into a narrative rhythm, a fugue of communal and individual voices” (243). This synthesis recalls Benjamin’s analysis that works that transgress barriers, particularly those of media and genre, the mass and the individual, are those that are most apt to meet the two qualities of his thesis. Laurence sees Woolf’s fugue of war

29 In her diary, 19 October 1937, Woolf records “the form of a new novel. Its to be first the statement of the theme: then the restatement: & so on: repeating the same story: singling out this & then that: until the central idea is stated” (5: 114).

30 Discussing Woolf’s music in the novel, Sonita Sarker has argued against Lukács’s view of modernism, turning to aspects of Adorno’s “negative dialectics” and praise of modernist music in order to argue for the political import of Woolf’s disruptive narrative strategies (161). Sarker shows how Lukács’s criticisms persecuting modernism are the basis of a defense of modernism.
in the counterpoint voiced most often in the newspaper’s influence on characters’ visions of the present moment, as when Isa has read of a girl raped by a soldier and Giles has read of sixteen men shot across the channel. These examples are the “rhythmic counterpoint to the dramatic march of Miss La Trobe’s pageant of England on the home front” (241). Given Laurence’s focus on war, one theme in Woolf’s score I would suggest, she rightly identifies our experience of the novel as “the anxious counterpoint of a modern musical composition,” a disharmony not unlike, she says, John Cage’s theorization (239).

I want to briefly examine the point to the counterpoint of war that Laurence has identified, the pulse of life and beauty in the novel that critics often obscure in their efforts to show Woolf’s engagement with war. However unfashionable it may be to discuss concepts such as beauty (in Woolf’s moment and in ours), the experience of beauty and the insistent pulse of life is essential if Woolf’s text is to avoid nihilism (although this is a reading several critics attribute to the text) and instead inspire an ethos of mutual accommodation and collaborative creation, a reader as producer. I return then to the opening movement of the novel, before the guests arrive (37), which the reader may initially perceive as random fragments but finally reveals itself as a montage of interrelated portraits (although hardly conventional portraiture, as the introduction to Lucy Swithin reveals) of the Olivers’ morning.

These portraits of the Olivers and their relationships are connected, and our reception of them altered, by Woolf’s interposing them with brief lyric interludes. Woolf’s interludes include the point of view of the lower classes connected with Pointz Hall (the nurses caring for Isa’s children, Mrs. Sands the cook who must briefly work
alongside Lucy, and Candish the butler who readies the dining-room), the perspective of
nature (embodied by Bond the cow man who observes with indifference and speaks a
“cow language presumably,” and the landscape viewed from Pointz Hall), and the I-less
empty rooms of the house: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a
shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house,
alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (28, 37).
Indeed, this last quote, the lyric song of the empty dining-room, completes a variation on
the very first movement of Woolf’s subject-less montage, which moved from a distant
view of Pointz Hall, to the perspective of outsiders and a chauffer, to the ancestors buried
in the cemetery, to the portraits in the hall, to the stopped watch. After Woolf’s series of
interrelated portraits of the Olivers, she reprises this movement, moving from the butler’s
point of view arranging flowers, to the portraits in the hall again, and to the empty room
which becomes the “essence of emptiness, silence” (37).

Within the eye-centered, I-less brackets of this movement, the moments making
up the portraits of Woolf’s montage evidence the range of her lyric narrative method—
articulating beauty, but beauty touched by menace, and humor, but humor weighted by
critique. For example, Lucy’s portrait is followed by a page break. Then the “sweetness”
of the morning is given in our observation of the nurses walking with Isa’s children on
the terrace—Caro in a perambulator and the young boy, George; the narrator next poses
nature’s perspective counter to man’s; and then this montage gives way to a point of
view, that of George, who is grubbing in the grass.

George grubbed. The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane
after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of
velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness
became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling, of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. (11)

The reader enters into one of Woolf’s moments of being through her lyric prose: we experience the sensations that create the moment of beauty when the barriers of inner and outer are “torn” creating a feeling of wholeness blazing and grasped. And we experience the shock of interruption that destroys the moment yet paradoxically secures the moment in memory: “Then there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms” (12).

Bart Oliver has attempted to surprise George from behind a tree with his newspaper “cocked into a snout”; however, when the boy sees the monster revealed as his grandfather, and despite his nurse’s urging him to say good morning, “George stood gaping. George stood gazing” (12). The phrase evokes Lucy, whom, we recall, has remembered being rebuked by her mother for her tendency to expand the moment, “Don’t stand gaping, Lucy, or the wind’ll change. . .” (9). Nonetheless, Woolf renders Bart Oliver, who takes his disappointment at George’s behaviour (he bursts into tears) out on his loyal dog, not unsympathetic: we feel his hurt in his failure to connect with George, a hurt which must be covered over so that Bart pins the boy as a “cry-baby” and the landscape a “picture,” and brusquely finds his place in his newspaper. As readers, we experience the complex web of emotions that make up the moment and we are led to reflect upon them by Woolf’s layering of the characters’ experiences. The tenderness of the moment interrupted—George and his flower, Bart and his grandson—is punctuated by the indifferent perspective of nature, the permanence of “flowing fields, heath and
woods,” and the menace of the external encroaching world which is hardly permanent, despite our best efforts to fix it: “‘M. Daladier,’ [Bartholomew] read, finding his place in the column, ‘has been successful in pegging down the franc. . . .’” (13).

In addition to George and Lucy, Isa also proves a master of the divided glance. Isa particularly is given a critical awareness and agency in her ability to appropriate fragments from a text for her imagination and project and direct that image against the backdrop of her prosaic realities. Woolf’s framing of Isa strikingly recalls Germaine Dulac’s framing (and accentuation of mirrors and framing devices) of Madame Beudet in her film The Smiling Madame Beudet. The morning portrait of Isa, which follows that of George and Bart, seems to indeed quote the setting, visuals, and dynamics of Dulac’s often cited scene, discussed previously, of Madame Beudet sitting in the morning before her three-fold mirror:

Mrs. Giles Oliver drew the comb through the thick tangle of hair which, after giving the matter her best attention, she had never had shingled or bobbed; and lifted the heavily embossed silver brush that had been a wedding present […]. She lifted it and stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face; and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops. (13-4)

Isa sees, “[i]nside the glass, in her eyes,” her feeling of being “in love” the night before with “the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer,” and sees “outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table […] the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—‘The father of my children’,” the “cliché conveniently provided by fiction” (14).

Isa’s gaze juxtaposes these two kinds of loves, one poetic, one prosaic, (but perhaps both clichéd): “Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table” (14).
However, a third kind of love, one she (or the narrator) questions after, triangulates this dialectic: “But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking-glass, out of doors, she saw” her children and the nurses coming across the lawn (14). Isa returns to the looking-glass, love in the eyes, and compares the vibration Mr. Haines’s presence inspired—“handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet”—to an “aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon” (15). Isa’s groping for words and then humming them into a rhythmic, rhyming line is, however, cut short by her telephoning to order fish. As in Dulac’s portrayal of Madame Beudet, the woman’s flight of imagination is continually run to ground again, either by external or internalized interruptions. Isa thinks of her nascent poem, “The words weren’t worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected,” and pegs herself down with another word: “‘Abortive,’ was the word that expressed her” (15). As in Dulac’s abrupt insertion of naturalistic street scenes as a contrast to the impressionist scenes of Madame Beudet’s imaginative flights within her confining domestic space, and as in Woolf’s preceding portrait of Lucy, Woolf closes off the episode by bringing us up sharply in a slightly parodic version of the prosaic, materialist portrait: “she never looked like Sappho, or one of the beautiful young men whose photographs adorned the weekly papers. She looked what she was: Sir Richards’s daughter; and niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud, being O’Neils, of their descent from the Kings of Ireland” (16).

Caught between the poetic and the prosaic, between two generations, between her own desires and patriarchal convention, between interior vision and external realities, Isa is also located within the context of literature—the contexts of production and tradition.
Nonetheless, even these contexts are made strange by the perspective of the world seen without a self. Books, “mirrors of the soul,” reflect emptiness in the lyric connecting Isa’s morning portrait to a scene in the library. Only a butterfly inhabits the room, “the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window; beat, beat, beat; repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane” (17). Nonetheless, Bart enters and drowses, and Isa, who “continued him,” enters as well (18). Feeling “pegged down on a chair arm,” made “a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity,” Isa listens to Bart’s report of George’s cowardly behavior and turns to the shelves (18-19). Isa looks at the books: “There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine.” But books seem to offer no remedy, for like her generation she is both “[b]ook-shy” and “gun-shy” (19). Isa rejects lyric poetry (Keats, Shelley, Yeats, and Donne), biography (Garibaldi, Lord Palmerston), history and archaeology, and science (Eddington, Darwin, Jeans), for the newspaper instead. “For her generation the newspaper was a book,” and Isa’s reading of the text is, like Lucy’s, not passive but appropriative, projecting its images onto the world around her (20).

Isa reads the Times as if cutting segments to produce a montage rather than following a journalist’s narrative: “she took it and read: ‘A horse with a green tail . . .’ which was fantastic. Next, ‘The guard at Whitehall . . .’ which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: ‘The troopers told her the horse had a green tail,’” and she further reads of a girl being dragged into a barrack and thrown on a bed,
Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face. . . .’

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer. (20)

Isa’s inner eye produces the newspaper’s text that appears more “real” than the wall of the library which is “in fact,” so that we move space by space into the imagined room with Isa as in a camera’s zooming long take. This inner vision, created out of the newspaper’s material and projected out, becomes enmeshed with the vision of her actual eye as Mrs. Swithin enters, so that Lucy and her hammer becomes part of the rape scene Isa has read about, and the girl’s rape becomes part of her vision of the annual pageant.

The distant horror of the “real” of the newspaper report becomes part of the too near “real” of day-to-day life in the village, so that the rhythm of the latter is defamiliarized by a new variation:

Every summer for seven years now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other. The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: ‘The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer’. (22)

This scene is frequently cited in analyses of Between the Acts precisely because of the remarkable effects its montage achieves, creating a site for the reader’s discovery of meaning—such as the connection of violence with patriarchal structures, the counterpoint of military violence with the complacency of the village, the connection of violence to military and religious institutions, and so on. Critics have also commented on the importance of the newspaper in Woolf’s work; indeed, the newspaper’s presence is key in interrupting the unfolding of narrative. On the one hand, it represents “fact,” objective
observation, a “truth” which Woolf’s characters compare their own subjective experiences against; the reporter, taking notes during La Trobe’s pageant, enacts a similar dialectic. On the other hand, from the “third party” perspective of Woolf’s readers, the juxtaposition of the newspaper’s facts and the characters’ perspectives calls into question not only the status of the characters’ subjective experiences (which had been privileged by Woolf’s and modernist texts) but also the status of the newspaper report (which had been privileged by the Lukásian backlash against modernist relativism).

The function of the newspaper in the novel might be compared to the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque before the First World War, in which scraps of newspaper undergo a similar juxtaposition, between “the ‘illusionism’ of the reality fragments that have been glued on the canvas,” and the montage techniques of cubism, “the ‘abstraction’ […] in which the portrayed objects are rendered” (Bürger 73). These early paintings, however, are not emblematic of the montage of interruption associated with Brecht and Benjamin that characterizes Woolf’s technique here. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger writes that while Picasso’s *Still Life* of 1912 is provoking in its technique (the inclusion of pasted on strips of newspaper on his cubist canvas), “the reality fragments remain largely subordinate to the aesthetic composition” and “although there is destruction of the organic work that portrays reality, art itself is not being called into question, as it is in the historic avant-garde movements” (74). Woolf’s last novel, I argue, is aligned with the latter in renouncing the quest for the creation of “an aesthetic object” for instead an engagement with the praxis of life that disrupts the “institution of art” as it stands (Bürger 74). Bürger’s seminal assessment of the avant-garde is helpful in locating Woolf’s use of montage in relation to the avant-garde movements between the
wars, and in theorizing how Woolf’s technique functions in Benjamin’s “revolutionary” terms. Bürger argues that the aim of the European avant-garde movements was “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society,” seeking to negate not a previous form or style of art, but rather “art as an institution” separate from life: rather than a destruction of art, they proposed to transfer art “to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form” (49). This purpose had been made possible by aestheticism’s rejection of bourgeois praxis and by its self-reflexivity, that is, in making the “distance from the praxis of life the content of [its] works” (49). Particularly in the self-reflexive scenes in which a reader reactivates a work of art by projecting it upon reality, or by the interruption of the real in the work of art, both Woolf and H.D. demonstrate Bürger’s theory of the historic avant-garde in building upon but departing from l’art pour l’art; that is, they “attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (49).

Changes in reception and production created new, specific challenges for the historic avant-garde, as well as for Woolf and H.D., in pursuing such an endeavor. Woolf and H.D. undertake this attempt because of an ethic of care, a desire to shape the future differently. Given this ethic of engagement, they faced a number of pitfalls in transforming the institution of art. In order to criticize current praxis, they required a distance that would enable critical cognition, yet this distance also seems to reify art as a separate institution. They wanted to encourage readers to imagine a “better order,” yet wanted to avoid the “affirmative” artwork that satiated the reader’s desire for that order. The authority of the author—as an autonomous individual producing an autonomous work of art—is destabilized by the avant-garde work, yet the concept of “the individual character of artistic production” must be retained (Bürger 51). *Between the Acts*
negotiates this impasse of individual genius versus the death of the author: first, in Woolf’s interruptive technique that refuses the total or organic work of art by making readers co-creators of the work; and second, in the self-reflexivity of La Trobe’s reflections on the attractions and limitations of playing the role of the author. Bürger uses the example of Breton’s instructions for writing automatic texts, which “have the character or recipes,” to show how the surrealist iteration of the historic avant-garde sought to “eliminate the antitheses between producer and recipient” and to make these categories meaningless: “All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one’s life as best one can” (53). However, such a praxis raises the danger of “solipsism,” “which Surrealism at least partly succumbed to,” in retreating “to the problems of the isolated subject” (53). Whereas Breton turned to the erotic relationship and group discipline, Woolf attempts to avoid solipsism in refusing to construct her self as the central subject and by continually interrupting the closed life of the village by indicating its global interconnections—often via the newspaper, but as well though the audience’s fragmentary conversations during the pageant and the twelve aeroplanes that interrupt the reverend’s closing speech as the church’s treasurer.

Bürger’s conclusion in considering these paradoxes of an avant-garde that would integrate art with the praxis of life for a progressive aim bears upon Woolf’s text. The attempt is necessarily a failed one: its realization “has not occurred, and presumably

31 For Bürger, “in the organic (symbolic) work of art, the unity of the universal and the particular is posited without mediation; in the nonorganic (allegorical) work to which the works of the avant-garde belong, the unity is a mediated one” (56). Bürger’s excellent point that “[t]he avant-gardiste work does not negate unity as such […] but a specific kind of unity” (56), is worth keeping in mind in a text that negates a specific kind of unity in order to discover a different kind of unity, one that reminds us of its Janus face of disunity.
cannot occur,” except in the “false sublation of autonomous art” that has occurred in “commodity aesthetics” (54). Bürger concludes, “one will need to ask whether a sublation of the autonomy status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable” (54). Whereas critics such as John Xiros Cooper have declared the sublation of autonomous art (and all human interaction) into capitalism’s market exchange as a fait accompli by the end of the twentieth century and the question of whether this is good or bad irrelevant, I believe it is worthwhile pursuing Bürger’s question. This free space, the “running-room” that much postmodern art eliminates, as Hal Foster has noted (xiv), becomes the dialectical ground that Woolf must so carefully create and preserve, harnessing the distance that enables critical thought and the intimacy that enables readers to become authors of their world. For Woolf, all that remains is the individual, knowing his or herself in a collective, who uses the poetic and prosaic as an instrument for living one’s life as best one can, which means discovering and creating beauty with others and improving upon that instrument.

The “revolutionary effect” of the avant-garde work lies in its destruction of “the traditional concept of the organic work of art” and its replacement with another concept, a concept which Bürger explains in terms of, first, a different understanding of newness (which might be attributed to Benjamin), second, the construction of seemingly chance constellations, and, third, the use of allegory and montage (59). Whereas the narrative of

---

32 In Design and Crime (and other diatribes), writing of postmodernism’s consolidation within the consumerist loop of capitalism (despite its early promise as an opening from a petrified modernism), Hal Foster has described the need for a dialectic space in art once again, reviving Karl Kraus’s term for such a space, “running-room.”
modernism is traditionally related as a break from Victorian form and content in favor of the “new,” Bürger argues that the “new” is too vague a term to account for the truly radical break of the historical avant-garde: “Through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate. […] no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced as art than any other” (63). In *Between the Acts*, Woolf moves closer to this different kind of break. What is “new” is the orientation to the past the novel creates; rather than the binary preserve (nostalgia) or create (modern), Woolf enables both by undermining the aura that distances particular traditions and by shifting the aura away from the autonomous artist’s artwork to the acts of creation undertaken by a diverse audience. Shakespeare isn’t rejected, rather, the aura that separates Shakespeare from the common reader (thanks to such influences as the university and the rise of a professional class of literary critics) is rejected; the plays are thus able to be made use of in the present by the common reader. In *Between the Acts*, the characters’ thoughts and dialogue include a network of fragments of various arts (poetry, journalism, film, history, drama) across various centuries that serve both to connect and individualize the characters. This nexus is a source of Woolf’s lyric mode, dependent more than ever upon a spectrum of voices and discourses and her reader’s reconstructions. The consequence is that we view these discourses, inherited traditions, and individual contributions in a “simultaneity” rather than an historicist progression.

La Trobe has chosen to stage the pageant out of doors on the terrace with bushes for dressing-rooms and trees for a backdrop; the roles are played by men, women, and children from the village. It begins with an Old English prologue, and progresses through
a medieval song, a tableau of Elizabeth I who oversees a play reminiscent of Shakespeare, a tableau of the Age of Reason, a condensed Restoration drama called *Where there’s a Will there’s a Way*, a panorama of the imperialism of the Victorian age overseen by Budge the policeman, and a skit skewering a young Victorian couple at a picnic who vow to spend their lives converting the heathen in Africa. Whether by nature (unintended but enabled by La Trobe), by the gramophone (La Trobe’s choice), or by intervals (the village’s choice), the pageant’s interruptions and chronological gaps disrupt a traditional view of the history of England. Instead, by destroying the aura of both, the pageant makes history and art available to the audience.

Woolf opens this running-room in which the audience discovers simultaneously the historical figure seen anew and themselves as agents of history on both the first and second level of montage. The villagers discover themselves in taking up their roles (Mrs. Rogers “grotesque in her black stockings” is “revealed” as Cleopatra in La Trobe’s “cauldron” making Lucy feel she might have been Cleopatra as well, “You’ve stirred in me my unacted part”); and Woolf’s readers experience a similar revelation in the pageant’s final scene, “The Present Time. Ourselves” (153, 178). Here, La Trobe halts the forward movement of the pageant, an excruciating experiment for both director and audience. When the younger generation reappears on the terrace holding up fragments of looking-glasses, the audience virtually appears on stage and their images are then joined with a panoply of characters from the pageant: “Queen Bess, Queen Anne; and the girl in the Mall; and the Age of Reason; and Budge the policeman. […] And the Pilgrims. And the lovers. And the grandfather’s clock. And the old man with a beard. They all appeared. What’s more, each declaimed some phrase or fragment from their parts” (184-
This unsettling of history, of class, and of audience and author sets the stage for self-reflexivity, not merely on the author’s part, but on the participants’ as well. From the bushes, a “voice asserted itself,” “anonymous, loud-speaking affirmation” and calls the audience to question and examine, to “calmly consider ourselves.” The voice, which is likely La Trobe, reveals fragments of the individuals of the audience and even questions “myself now. Do I escape my own reprobation, stimulating indignation, in the bush, among the leaves?” (188). The voice directs attention then to a wall that has been erected on stage:

*the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves?*

*All the same here I change (by way of the rhyme mark ye) to a loftier strain—there’s something to be said: for our kindness to the cat; note too in today’s paper ‘Dearly loved by his wife’* (188)

The voice marks out other “scraps, orts and fragments”—minor, anonymous poetic moments in prosaic life missed by the march of history—that reveal an impulse in human nature that affirms a positive potential in the audience to build civilization perhaps differently than it has been. The gramophone then offers an affirmation, after a jumble of records (“fox-trot, Sweet Lavender, Home Sweet Home, Rule Britannia”), with a final tune that “thank heaven” replaces “the anonymous bray of the infernal megaphone” (188).

The element of chance is key in La Trobe’s work and in the effect of Woolf’s as well. La Trobe opens her pageant to chance in several key instances, and Woolf emphasizes the wrenching difficulty this loss of control creates for the artist. During the interval following the Victorians and preceding the final episode of “Present Time, Ourselves,” the audience is made distinctly uncomfortable. Rather than smoothing over
the interval with music, the gramophone ticks: “All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. [...] They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves” (178). In this “limbo,” Woolf voices the individual thoughts of the audience en masse, ironically “getting” what they insist cannot be had:

“Ourselves. . . .” They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; [...] but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous. “Myself”—it was impossible. Other people, perhaps . . . Cobbet of Cobbs Corner; the Major; old Bartholomew; Mrs. Swithin—them perhaps. But she won’t get me. (179)

La Trobe meanwhile curses at her audience as she abides by the experiment she has written in her script, “try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc.” (179). However, this experiment of saturating them “with present-time reality” seems to go wrong: “‘Reality too strong,’ she muttered” (179).

While this may seem an indictment of the audience for their inability to face reality, Woolf instead emphasizes that it is precisely La Trobe’s connection to her audience that makes the experiment a trial: “She felt everything they felt,” and briefly she wishes for every prop her experiment rejects—a back cloth to block out the view, music to unite and focus the audience—as well as for an ideal of ultimate control, “O to write a play without an audience” (180). La Trobe, no longer the author of the moment, feels blood pouring from her shoes: “This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. Unable to lift her hand, she stood facing the audience” (180). It is important to note that Woolf allows La Trobe to both be immersed in the reality of the experiment and to witness it from a critical distance. She feels, in her gut, the paralysis of death, but “in the margin of her mind” she takes notes on the centrality of illusion in the face of our realities and the power of disillusionment. This moment of
standstill for audience and author, facing each other, is interrupted by chance: “And then the shower fell, sudden, profuse” (180). Woolf’s definite article “the” adds to the sense that this unforeseen cloud’s sudden appearance is part of the pageant’s script. Indeed, the shower provides the counterpoint of emotion and revelation to the crisis of the present moment’s paralysis. Woolf’s description of the cloud’s rain, first from the narrator’s perspective of the audience, then from Isa’s, then from La Trobe’s, reveals its unifying note. “No one had seen the cloud coming. There it was, black, swollen, on top of them. Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears” (180). Isa murmurs, as if in response and echoing La Trobe’s wish for a play without an audience, “O that our human pain could here have ending!” (180). Isa’s face receives “two great blots of rain,” and she affirms they are “all people’s tears, weeping for all people” (180). La Trobe, also with rain on her cheeks, affirms the “universal” of the rain as the key element that’s “done it”: “Nature once more had taken her part. The risk she had run acting in the open air was justified. She brandished her script,” a simple tune began, “but now that the shower had fallen, it was the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one’s voice. And the voice that wept for human pain unending” (181). It is in taking the chance of silence, anonymity, that the “other voice speaking” might be heard.

The chance appearance of the rain sets up the necessary mood that prefaces La Trobe’s next moment in the pageant, a “crude tribute to ourselves” which the newspaper reporter describes, taking notes, as “Civilization (the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man

---

33 Woolf’s privileging of the marginal, the chance occurrence in changing the perspective of history here echoes Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*: “If it had not rained on the night of the 17th and 18th, the future of Europe would have changed; a few drops of rain more or less made Napoleon oscillate” (2: 10).
with hod) by human effort,” by the work, in fact, of women and oppressed nations (182). Despite the added pathos of the rain, the audience’s applause suggests that they have missed the implicit critique of the “tribute,” thus the importance of La Trobe’s next interruption, the changing of the tune from the simple, unifying “The King is in his counting house” to an infuriating, modernist piece from “the generation” of “the young” (183). Here we see how Woolf’s use of interruption is never by pure “objective chance”; she uses a “mediated production” rather than the “direct” production intended in the surrealists’ occurrences (Bürger 65). The difficulty of mediated production lies in incorporating the effects of interruption within the work of art without destroying the running-room between the praxis of life and the work of art, since it is the movement of the latter, however unconventional it may be, that enables emotional and critical engagement. In the agonies felt by Woolf’s self-reflexive character La Trobe, we witness the care and difficulty the author takes in the mediated production of chance. As Bürger writes, “In the principle of construction, there lies a renunciation of the subjective imagination in favor of a submission to the chance of construction,” and thus a submission to the audience’s construction (67). Such a work of art “is not the result of blind spontaneity in the handling of the material but its very opposite, the most painstaking calculation. But that calculation only extends to the means, whereas the result remains largely unpredictable” (67). Just as La Trobe must submit to the fact that the work of art—a nexus including script, nature, and players—created in collaboration with her audience is unpredictable and evanescent, Woolf must relinquish her authorial control in fixing “the result.”
The scene allows both author and audience to admit the discomfort of this shift in roles; the author exposes herself in her work, and the audience, becoming authors themselves, must submit to exposure as well: “Ourselves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts. . . .” (184). Yet, the “game” is indeed intoxicating as all “barriers” are “undone” as young and old, and even the dogs and cows join in the “the jangle and the din” (184). What’s more, in these fragments of the nonorganic work of art, a rhythm and music emerges. Woolf’s mediating hand ordering the montage—her arrangements of point of view, the musical beat of the audience’s thoughts, the counterpoint of chance—has the effect of revealing a lyrical core underlying the chaos of “Present Time. Ourselves.” In La Trobe’s momentary wish to create a work of art without an audience during the moment of panic when she feels her audience “slipping the noose” (180), we are led to reflect on the essential role of the audience, particularly for the nonorganic work. Woolf’s staging of an author and audience creating such a work at the center of her own allows her to invite her readers into this collaborative endeavor and to reflect on its possibilities and risks. Concluding “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin writes that the writer who submits to “mediating activity” in relinquishing the identity of author as supplier for the role of author as producer gains in the consequent heightened engagement with the audience (238). The writer is drawn to “orient his activity” to work that is not aimed at merely destroying the intellectual bourgeoisie, nor supplying the proletariat with the “spiritual” model of genius (238). Rather, the closer contact and exchange of writer with audience requires self-reflexive critique, an awareness of “his position in the process of production”: “Does he succeed in promoting the socialization of the intellectual means of
production? Does he see how he himself can organize the intellectual workers in the
production process? Does he have proposals for the Umfunktionierung of the novel, the
drama, the poem?” (238).

Bürger argues that “[t]he development of a concept of the nonorganic work of art
is a central task of the theory of the avant-garde” (68). I would extend this claim to
Woolf’s practice and the dialogic relationship she constructs with her audience, not only
in her common reader essays but also in her novels. In Between the Acts, Woolf
represents such a collaborative work, albeit in another art form, and leads her readers to
reflect on the similarities between the pageant and the novel. We are led to compare the
author-audience construction within the story-world of “Present Time” made possible by
La Trobe’s “principle of interruption” (Benjamin 234) to our own construction of
“Present Time” made possible by Woolf’s interruptive portrayal of La Trobe’s work.
The reflections glimpsed in the fragments of glass reflecting “Ourselves” affirms us,
Woolf’s readers, sitting on stage, at the center of her work: recalling Benjamin’s “What is
Epic Theatre?,” Woolf’s readers suddenly see themselves, a “third party” not
participating in the action, but essential in the realization of the work (149).

One might then describe this element of Woolf’s montage technique as allegory,
particularly Benjamin’s concept of allegory, which Bürger believes only found its
“adequate object” in “the avant-gardiste works” (68). Bürger identifies four aspects of
Benjamin’s concept of allegory.34 Two aspects that describe the procedure of allegory—

34 Bürger focuses on Benjamin’s elaboration of the concept in The Origin of German Tragic
Drama and identifies his schema for analyzing allegory: “1. The allegorist pulls one element out
of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. […] 2. The allegorist
joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. […] 3. Benjamin interprets the
the removal of elements from their context, the joining of these fragments and thus the
positing of meaning—are in “accord with what may be understood by ‘montage’” (70).
The other two elements of Benjamin’s concept of allegory characterize the dispositions of
author and audience, construction and reception. According to Benjamin, the allegorist is
in a state of melancholy. Bürger applies this disposition to the avant-gardiste’s hopeless
devotion to “the singular”: “Devotion to the singular is hopeless because it is connected
with the consciousness that reality as something to be shaped eludes one” (71). Such a
melancholic devotion to the elusive (the something that forever escapes) underlies
Woolf’s philosophy of art as well; it is important, however, not to confuse this attitude
with the paralysis of hopelessness or depression. Woolf followed Montaigne in
emphasizing the journey rather than the arrival; it is the attempt and the acts of creation
and communication in the work of art that matters.

Bürger cites Benjamin’s characterization of the audience’s disposition from his
earlier The Origin of German Tragic Drama, which I quote from its reappearance in The
Arcades Project, where Benjamin cites Adorno’s Kierkegaard quoting his own definition
of “allegory” in the context of “the interrelation of dialectic, myth, and image”:

[Adorno:] Dialectic comes to a stop in the image, and, in the context of recent
history, it cites the mythical as what is long gone: nature as primal history. For
this reason, the images […] may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin’s
expression, whose compelling definition of ‘allegory’ also holds true for
Kierkegaard’s allegorical intention taken as a figure of historical dialectic and
mythical nature. According to this definition, “in allegory the observer is
confronted with the ‘facies hippocratica’ [deathmask] of history, a petrified
primordial landscape.” (N2,7: 461)

activity of the allegorist as the expression of melancholy […]” and “Benjamin also addresses the
sphere of reception. Allegory, whose essence is fragment, represents” history as a “deathmask,” a
“petrified primordial landscape” (69).
In La Trobe’s pageant, history, which had been given an organic status, is alienated and thus rediscovered; the historicist’s history and the realist’s narrative are revealed to be a construction (a deathmask) that displaces the original, elusive realities. Contra to the organic work of Lukásian realism, in avant-garde allegory and montage “the appearance (Schein) of nature” is exposed: “The ‘fitted’ (montierte) work calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance (Schein) of totality” (Bürger’s 72). In Bürger’s identification of the technique of montage and allegory as enabling the theory of the avant-garde to be realized in the nonorganic work of art, he returns us to Benjamin’s two qualities of a work that would have the correct political and literary tendencies: “Paradoxically, the avant-gardiste intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art” (72).

This is not to argue, however, that a work that employs montage and allegory, in pointing to a heterogeneous reality, necessarily achieves the correct political and literary tendency. As Scott and Haraway have argued, poststructuralism is not enough. As in “The Work of Art,” Benjamin’s ambivalent conclusion reminds us that aesthetic innovations, like mechanical innovations, may be used for socially progressive or destructive ends. Bürger likewise notes that such a reduction is belied by the fact “[t]hat montage was used both by the Italian futurists, of whom it can hardly be said they wanted to abolish capitalism, and by Russian avant-gardistes after the October revolution, who were working in a developing socialist society” (78). Indeed, this withholding of meaning and refusal to dictate reception is the source of La Trobe’s spasm of doubt and anguish, the risk the avant-garde artist takes in inviting the audience to become producers
of the work. In Benjamin’s conception of *The Arcades Project* as well as his analysis of epic theatre, the effect of allegory (we encounter a deathmask) and montage (traditional modes of reception are interrupted) for the reader is one of shock. In “What is Epic Theater?,” Benjamin, like Woolf and H.D., uses the language of “shock” to describe the process of montage:

Like the pictures in a film, epic theater moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the single, well-defined situations of the play collide. The songs, the captions, the lifeless conventions set off one situation from another. This brings about intervals which, if anything, impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. *These intervals are reserved for the spectators’ critical reaction*—to the actions of the players and to the way in which they are presented. (153; emphasis added)

Yet, as Bürger notes, “[t]he problem with shock,” in and of itself, “is that it is generally nonspecific” (80). In a footnote, Bürger suggests that “Brecht’s estrangement theory is the most consistent attempt to overcome what is nonspecific in the effect of shock and to deal with this problem dialectically” (119).

Benjamin’s turn to Brecht’s theory of epic theatre and Woolf’s staging of the self-reflexive scene of the avant-garde pageant are motivated by a desire to, if not overcome, to mediate the nonspecificity of shock. If the potential ineffectiveness of shock in terms of reception are a strengthening of “existing attitudes” as a result of the shock’s provocation or an ineffectiveness in reception due to the proliferation of shock effects in modern culture (Bürger 80-81), then the estrangement of the reader’s own experience of the shock provides a way to negotiate both pitfalls. Such estrangement is achieved in the literal “intervals” of Woolf’s novel, as readers are enabled to reconsider their critical reactions in reading the audience’s experience of shock in watching La Trobe’s pageant.

In voicing the audience members’ reception of the pageant, both in direct quotations from
individuals and in more fluid choruses of many voices in an indirect lyrical discourse, Woolf enables readers to both experience the shock of the pageant/novel’s unfolding and to reflect on their reception of it. For example, the Victorian episode which ends with Budge the policeman calling all back to “‘Ome, Sweet ‘Ome” initially provokes an injured reaction, a reification of existing attitudes from two audience members:

There was an interval.
“Oh but it was beautiful,” Mrs. Lynn Jones protested. Home she meant; the lamplit room; the ruby curtains; and Papa reading aloud.
[…]
“Cheap and nasty, I call it,” snapped Etty Springett, referring to the play, and shot a vicious glance at Dodge’s green trousers, yellow spotted tie, and unbuttoned waistcoat. (173)

Etty’s comment reveals the re-entrenchment in convention that La Trobe’s technique provokes, and her “vicious glance” at William Dodge, the homosexual poet from London who identifies with Lucy and Isa, paralyzes our ability to empathize with her. Rather, we are more interested in, if not empathetic with, Mrs. Lynn Jones, whose thoughts Woolf follows further as Jones compares her nostalgic vision of home with the image the pageant has just presented, and thus begins to question its pre-eminence: “Was there, she mused, as Budge’s red baize pediment was rolled off, something—not impure, that wasn’t the word—but perhaps ‘unhygienic’ about the home? […] Or why had it perished?” (173-4).

Woolf privileges the audience members who take up the work, who enter into the critical space of reflection and dialogue rather than closing themselves off from its shocks. The chorus of voices also models the move from shock to participation, questioning, and creation. When the tune changes after the wall of Civilization has been erected again and just before the players hold up their mirrors in “Present Time,” the
audience reacts to the pleasant waltz-like melody of the gramophone which seems to be personified in the swallows that retreat and advance, skimming the terrace.

Yes, perched on the wall, they [the swallows] seemed to foretell what after all the *Times* was saying yesterday. Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall. Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole. . . . (183)

The ellipses marks a break, as the falseness of this utopian vision of a rebuilt utopian civilization in the near future is exposed (made particularly glaring by the readers’ post World War context) and the melody cut:

The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Foxtrot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! Well, with the means at her disposal, you can’t ask too much. What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? (183)

The interior discourse of the audience aligns itself with the very tune it critiques, so that as we read the passage—hearing the gramophone’s music through its rhythm and rhymes—our reactions as readers to Woolf’s unconventional technique (the interior discourse of a group of voices) is curiously voiced or even displaced by Woolf’s chorus. As Woolf’s co-collaborators, we are given a privileged perspective of the irony of the audience’s condemnation of the younger generation’s effrontery being voiced in a rhythm that incorporates the impudent music into their own: “The young, who can’t make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole. What a cackle, what a rattle, what a yaffle—as they call the woodpecker, the laughing bird that flits from tree to tree” (183). In crafting this chorus which is bracketed by waltzing swallow and hammering woodpecker, Woolf shows us how the new vision, encompassing a gesture of smashing to splinters and atoms the old vision, has its own,
different, beauty. She thus reassures the resistant reader that it isn’t that art must be destroyed, but that art must be discovered in its relation to the praxis of life, and perhaps that our living be appreciated as a collaborative art. After the pageant, La Trobe refuses to emerge from the bushes and wishes “to remain anonymous” (194). The audience and actors linger and mingle, and indeed seem to take up La Trobe’s creative part in discovering a final scene produced by their own vision: “Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes. Beauty was on them. Beauty revealed them. Was it the light that did it? […] ‘Look,’” the audience whispered, ‘O look, look, look—’ And once more they applauded, and the actors joined hands and bowed” (195-96).

Bürger argues that the intent of the shock of the avant-garde artist’s withholding of meaning is to “direct the reader’s attention to the fact that the conduct of one’s life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock is […] the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis” (80). Discussing the “impossibility to make permanent” the effect of shock, Bürger touches upon what I would argue is the reason for the continued relevance of nonorganic works of art such as Woolf’s novel in contrast to the Dadaists’ works, which now are “consumed” in the postmodern experience (81). Asking what “remains” of the avant-garde in a context in which its shocks are familiar and anticipated, Bürger suggests that “the enigmatic quality of the forms, their resistance to the attempt to wrest meaning from them” remain, and thus move recipients “to another level of interpretation,” to “the principles of construction that determine the constitution of the work” (81). On first glance, this move would seem to signal the failure of the avant-garde theory since the move to “principles of construction” seems to pull author and audience even further away
from the praxis of life. However, as Woolf’s principles of interruption and her characters’ experience of such principles (particularly Isa’s) perform, the necessary first step toward the realization of a “new plot” in our life praxis is seeing past the seeming whole, the \textit{Schein}, of our inherited plots to their principles of construction.

Following “Present Time, Ourselves,” Woolf offers a montage of interpretations of the pageant that moves readers—who themselves will soon be reaching the close of Woolf’s text—toward “another level of interpretation” (Bürger 81). First, the anonymous voice from the bushes asks us to consider “Ourselves,” asking us to consider a montage of specific fragments of the most admirable and most banal of human behavior across classes, sexes, and ages, and then asking us to look at the wall “which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization” and to consider how we have constructed it (188). The voice’s final note is of affirmation, a question that challenges the audience to recognize their role in the collaborative venture of constructing a civilization according to different principles. Following the voice, music plays—a moment of key importance for Woolf’s philosophy of art, which I return to—and then the reporter notes Rev. G.W. Streatfield mounting the soap box to speak. It is a testament to the success of the vision La Trobe attempts to impart in her montage that the audience, which has earlier wished for tradition and definite conclusions, recoils from the arrival of this most conventional speaker:

\begin{quote}
All gazed. What an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity he was to be sure! Of all incongruous sights a clergyman in the livery of his servitude to the summing up was the most grotesque and entire. [...] What need have we of words to remind us? Must I be Thomas, you Jane? (190)
\end{quote}

Having expanded their identities beyond their scripted roles to see and embrace the incredible diversity of “Ourselves,” the audience rebels against the terms of a
discourse that will return them to the limits of Tom and Jane. However, Streatfield—particularly by the stain of tobacco juice on his finger—is discovered as one of “themselves; a butt, a clod, laughed at by looking-glasses; ignored by the cows, condemned by the clouds which continued their majestic rearrangement of the celestial landscape” and thus an admirable “representative spokesman” (190). Nonetheless, the audience does take up its “traditional manner as if they were seated in church” and prepares to passively receive the reverend’s words as they would a sermon pronouncing a final judgment on the text. However, Streatfield asks questions about the “message” of the pageant rather than offering answers, thus disrupting the audience’s state of passive reception: “If he didn’t know, calling himself Reverend, also M.A., who after all could?” (191). Streatfield tentatively proposes his own interpretation, emphasizing it is only his attempt in understanding what was shown, employing rhetorical twists quite similar to Woolf’s in her essays on reading which inevitably push readers to develop their own standards of judgment and their own interpretations. In his reading of the pageant, the reverend suggests that “we are given to understand” that “Each is part of the whole,” and, offering examples of what he saw, proposes, “We act different parts; but are the same. That I leave to you” (192). Streatfield increasingly proves an ideal audience for La Trobe’s vision, suggesting that his being distracted during “the play or pageant” had been perhaps “part of the producer’s intention? I thought I perceived that nature takes her part. Dare we, I asked myself; limit life to ourselves? May we not hold that there is a spirit that inspires, pervades . . .” (192). While his interpretation here moves toward God as the ultimate producer, he refrains and repeats, “I leave that to you,” since he speaks “only as one of the audience, one of ourselves” (192). Woolf, it is notable, does not allow
Streatfield to appear a caricature signifying organized religion or to serve as the butt of her scorn; more subtly, she places in parenthesis, “(The swallows were sweeping around him. They seemed cognizant of his meaning. Then they swept out of sight.)” (192). It is left to us to decide whether the collaboration of nature in the pageant or in Streatfield’s own interpretation of it—the swallows “seem” cognizant—points to a divine spirit behind the work of art or points to our own intentionality (the audience as producers) reflected.

This ambiguity is triangulated by an interruption: as Streatfield takes up the business of collecting for the church’s fund for “illumination,” his words are “cut in two” by the zoom of “Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck” (193). The “thread of his discourse” is then finally utterly lost by his benign contemplation of the village’s idiot, who has unsettled the audience throughout the pageant, and he finds no clear ending possible since La Trobe maintains her anonymity and refuses a tribute of thanks (194). As they disperse to the affirming gramophone’s strains, “triumphant yet valedictory: Dispersed are we; who have come together. But, the gramophone asserted, let us retain whatever made that harmony,” the audience echoes and affirms this call in unwinding, weaving, worrying their own threads of discourse, interpreting the pageant, discovering the widest possible variation of connections and departures (196). For nearly four pages that are as deft as La Trobe’s pageant, Woolf offers a stream of the audience members’ diverse reactions and interpretations, registering juxtapositions of notes that range from the most profound metaphysical reflections, to the most pressing realities as in the newspaper’s account of the Jews, to the most trite observations of the latest fashions (197-201).
Although the avant-garde artwork did not destroy art as an institution or sublate the institution into the praxis of life, its revolutionizing of that institution enabled us to become aware of the work’s context and principles of constitution and thus enabled the work of art to “enter a new relationship to reality” (Bürger 91). Moreover, in Woolf’s work, which destabilizes the binaries of “pure” and “political” art by allowing “political and nonpolitical motifs to exist side by side,” a “new type of engaged art” is made possible (Bürger 91). In their essays on the work of art engaging on the common ground and the insights of historical materialism, Woolf and Benjamin shift the argument from positing aesthetic norms that produce correct political effects (the materialist literary debate between Lukács and Adorno) to an analysis of the work’s social effects in contexts. Rather than judging the work according to a universal norm, they ask such questions as, does the work’s form or techniques function to empower the audience in particular ways, such as by revealing the constitution of the institutions and narratives framing their realities and by motivating them to engage in the creation of alternatives? This move to considering the audience’s role and the artwork’s function in a particular context marks Woolf’s and Benjamin’s difference from the positions articulated in the debate between Lukács (who privileges the organic, “realist” work of art) and Adorno (who privileges the new type of avant-garde as the only legitimate work of art). Woolf and Benjamin represent a third perspective to the debate, one that might be characterized

35 In his postscript to the second German edition, Bürger takes up Sartre’s notion of engaged literature, arguing that “Only in Brecht do we find elements of an aesthetic of engaged literature,” nonetheless, his theory can at most “be considered an indicator for the possibilities of engaged art after the historical avant-garde movements” (98). This look to “after,” which perhaps gives Brecht’s work an aspect of melancholy, is consistent with the disposition of Woolf’s and Benjamin’s World War II work.
in their interest in the concepts theorized in Brecht’s work, which both Lukács and Adorno rejected.36

The key shift that Brecht’s theories represent in going beyond the latter debate lies in the change in the “place value of the political contents of the work”: in the nonorganic work, the effects of its individual elements are not subsumed as references to the whole of the work. Instead, “[t]he recipient is free to respond to the individual sign as an important statement concerning the praxis of life, or as political instruction” since the sign in the nonorganic work has a new relation to reality (Bürger 90). For Benjamin, H.D., and Woolf, the techniques of allegory, citation, and montage function to make such elements available to readers for “making use of them” (Arcades N1a,8: 460). Suspending the political and the purely aesthetic, the prosaic and the poetic in constellations, the truly revolutionary content of their texts lies in the pedagogical intent of its form, that is, to inculcate new, open-ended modes of reading, seeing, and responding.

In the Arcades Project, Benjamin states this intent in a way that demonstrates his methodology by taking a quotation out of one context (“The words are Rudolf Borchardt’s in Epilegomena zu Dante”) and placing it in the another (one stated purpose in his “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” Convolut N): “Pedagogic side of this undertaking: ‘To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows […]’” (N1,8: 458). The project must “develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation

36 As Bürger explains, Lukács rejected Brecht since his work exemplifies the nonorganic work. Adorno rejects Brecht because his theory does not make room for an artist that “endeavored to give shape to” the unconscious “nexus between the work and the society that conditions it” (87).
marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage” (N1,10: 458). Montage, particularly in the example of film, effaces the function of the punctuation of the quotation mark in revealing the previously unseen continuity between two elements or contexts. Not relieved by the containment that the quotation mark would provide and not directed by a narrator’s covering over of the roughness of the alien matter, the reader is roused from passivity. The reader is called upon to produce the meaning of the juxtapositions, a meaning that will be relevant only in the relationship of the text to that reader’s present context.

Woolf’s four pages of seemingly quoted discourse of the audience’s reactions as they leave Pointz Hall are one example of this “art of citing without quotation marks.” The long paragraphs do begin with literal quotation marks,

‘I do think,’ someone was saying, ‘Miss Whatershename should have come forward and not left it to the rector . . . After all, she wrote it . . . I thought it brilliantly clever . . . O my dear, I thought it utter bosh. Did you understand the meaning? Well, he said she meant we all act all parts . . . (197)

However, within the quotation marks a number of voices are speaking, with no indication of who or even clearly when a new voice enters as the ellipses soon fail to mark transitions between speakers. One effect is that the seemingly unmediated (but of course highly mediated) panoply of voices, the stream of talk which jumps from topic to topic and yet circulates, paradoxically creates the sense of unity. It is as if in capturing the flux and contradictions, this singular quoted discourse reveals an underlying connectedness and asks us to examine our part in it. Indeed, the talk has the habit of twitching from the subject of “the Brookes” traveling to Italy to highly self-reflexive commentary:

He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that’s the question! And if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel
sure if I go to the theatre, that I’ve grasped the meaning . . . Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? . . . Ding dong. Ding. . . that if we don’t jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same? (199-200)

La Trobe’s pageant seems to have succeeded in an avant-garde intent, and Woolf’s montage technique in citing the audience’s reactions draws us to consider our role as engaged readers in a community of readers.37

In considering this aspect of citation in Woolf’s montage technique, I turn to perhaps the most frequently cited scene in the novel—Giles’s killing of a snake and a toad between the acts of La Trobe’s pageant. The moment is cited so frequently, and stands out on the page so conspicuously (it is a good bet that any used or library copy of the novel a reader picks up will have heavy underlining around the paragraph), that it has become somewhat problematic for Woolf scholars, as if it were an aberration of undergraduate “Symbolism.” In contrast to the view of the fragment as an aberration, I propose to place it in the context of avant-garde allegory. The moment appears at the half-hour interval for tea, which La Trobe had agreed to (“a slave to her audience” she “gashed the scene here” “[j]ust as she had brewed emotion”) given “Mrs. Sands’ grumble—about tea” (94). As the audience disperses to the gramophone’s lament, Woolf briefly follows her primary players—Mrs. Manresa, Isa, William Dodge, Lucy and Bart—whose murmured or internal discourse and Woolf’s narration continues the rhyme and rhythm of the preceding pageant. Giles moves off alone, following the short cut in the fields to the Barn; he plays a “child’s game” by kicking a stone, “[a] barbaric stone; a pre-historic,” to a goal—naming his kicks according to his preoccupations: “The first

37 Thinking differently, Knowles argues that these dispersed spectators “end the book as bitterly isolated as they began. When the music dies away the pageant’s message is unheeded” (42).
kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward)” (98-99). Here is the paragraph, given an elegant curly bracket in blue pen by my copy’s previous owner (the only mark, notably, he or she placed in the book):

He reached it in ten. There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way around—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes. (99)

Chapters could be, and have been, filled in exploring the implications of Woolf’s symbolism here, and in examining the counterpoints she sets beside it. For example, Giles’s relief in action in the passage is a variation on La Trobe’s belief that a “vision imparted was relief from agony” and the blood that seems to pour from her shoes when she feels herself failing at the effort to impart a vision during her experiment of Present Time reality (98, 180). Giles’s behaviour may be read as a “monstrous inversion” of Isa’s abortive creativity, his rule bound game emblematic of the closed circuit of patriarchal, imperialist narratives. Zwerdling views the scene as a reference to the Munich crisis (307). However, my interest here is in our impulse as readers to bracket the paragraph, which suggests the passage’s strong allegorical design.

In his study of the typescripts of the novel, Sebastian Knowles identifies the paragraph as “clearly allegorical”: “The hyperrealism of its description prevents it from becoming real” (57). Knowles extends Woolf’s allegory of the “toad-snake,” which he reads as “the modern world, choking itself to death,” to Woolf herself choking on the overwhelming power of reality (57). “Woolf blurs the lines of reality and fantasy because the real world has become monstrous” (58). As a reader faced with the
“deathmask” of allegory that Woolf presents, Knowles attributes the irregularity of the texts’ fragments to a failure of the artist to take up the task of reproducing Schein. Rather than reading this allegory in the context of a novel that goes further than any of Woolf’s previous in the principle of montage, interruption, and nonorganicity, Knowles’s reading views the allegory as an aberration in what should have been an organic work: “With ‘Almost war’ pressing in, she imagines her book as an escape from the fragmented world into a complete whole” (39). The aberrations of the novel are read as attributable to a Woolf unable to handle the “real world”: “In this case it is Woolf’s own grasp of time and reality that is failing her; the collapse is internal as well as external” (58). In contrast to this view of a dazed, collapsed, and battered author (61), Ruotolo reads the allegory in the context of Woolf’s renewed devotion (represented in the novel’s form and articulated through La Trobe) to relinquishing the egoistic and hieratic “I” the author has hitherto claimed in writing the plots of fact and fiction. In effacing the boundaries between the internal and external, real and fantasy, author and spectator, Woolf destabilizes the institution of art in order to make possible a “new plot,” produced by the authors of an anonymous many.

The deathmask of allegory requires us to look both ways. It both reveals the immediate “reality” and points us beyond it to examine the principles of its construction.

38 Knowles’s identification of Woolf’s use of Forster’s The Abinger Pageant (45-8), provides an excellent context for examining her move toward the nonorganic work of art. In staging a variation of Forster’s pageant within her novel, and La Trobe’s pageant is more Brechtian and less didactic than Forster’s original, Woolf’s intent seems more to question the function of the work of art within culture and to critique the order that is passing as Esty has argued, than to lament “the passing of an old order unable to continue before a present disorder” (Knowles 48). It would seem that in reading Woolf’s novel in the frame of what an (organic) war novel should be, the principle of interruption, the text’s unclosed constellation of fragments, and emphasis on the reader’s collaboration can only amount to a lack of “validity” (55).
If the Munich crisis is made allegorical, blasted out of a progressive historicism, then the reality of the “unreal” allegory can turn readers to an examination of the narratives we perpetuate which may beget violence but save us from the psychic violence of deviating from these plots. Ruotolo compares Giles’s “gesture of raising his foot” to “Bernard’s incapacity to lift his foot in *The Waves*.” Bernard cannot move once the illusions that have made him a man and a writer are eclipsed. ‘A man without a self,’ he becomes ‘a heavy body leaning on a gate,’ until moved,” like Giles, “to take up his spear in chivalric action again” (215). Although Woolf is more sympathetic and self-critical in portraying Bernard, in both instances she underscores the move to violent action as a patriarchal posture. More damningly, she associates this move to violent action with the author’s ego (La Trobe cannot raise her hand when she risks her little death as an author). In exposing these connections, Woolf’s move is to interrupt “the contradictions of a culture in which love and hate, like peace and war, coexist” and where war is the action motivating a recurrent plot of destruction (Ruotolo 215).

As a result of Woolf’s crafting and placement of the snake-toad as allegory, the reader faces it like a deathmask, a citation, a gesture. In “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin explains the significance of “how Brecht’s discovery and use of the *gestus* is nothing but the restoration of the method of human montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event” (235). It is the interruption of the *gestus* that breaks open “the total dramatic work of art,” in which the snake-toad scene would serve as a symbol referring to a closed circuit of meaning within the total work of art rather than to the reader’s “real” world (235). The *gestus* of montage, in “mak[ing] use in a new way of the great, ancient opportunity of the theater,” or modernist
novel in Woolf’s case, enables an engaged art in which the stage or the page becomes a “laboratory” that functions to “expose what is present. […] Present-day man” (236).

When readers encounter the snake-toad allegory, they are certainly struck by its symbolism but also by a strangeness, an excessiveness that reveals “a chilled man […] chilled in a chilly environment,” and, present day man being “the only one we have, it is in our interest to know him” (Benjamin 235). Given Woolf’s juxtapositions before and after the scene and her too-precise phrasing in describing it, Giles’s gesture of stamping and crushing tends to provoke not an emotional response from the reader—whether revulsion or release at his violence or empathy at his frustration and pathetic gesture—but a sense of our distance from it. As in epic theatre, the purpose “is less concerned with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives” (235).

The bracketing and frequent citation the snake-toad scene has received, I would argue, speaks to its success in provoking the reader’s need to “make use of it,” to discover its meaning in a particular context. Giles’s gesture, subjected to this laboratory estrangement, becomes unnatural, unreal, so that the narratives and roles that have hitherto made violent action “natural” and Giles a conquering hero are made equally unnatural, unreal. The gesture, a citation of other larger narratives, thus is discovered as ridiculous, banal, and moreover as social, pointing to the “real” beyond the total artwork. As Brecht explained, the common tendency of art is “to remove the social element in any gest […] in contrast] [t]he social gest is the gest relevant to society”; it is “the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period” (104-5, 139). If defamiliarization exposes present-day man, “[w]hat emerges is
this: events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual course, by reason and practice” (Benjamin 235). In revealing the “construct[ion] from the smallest elements of behavior what in Aristotelian dramaturgy is called ‘action’” (236), Woolf’s principle of interruption allows us, the common readers, to discover the difficult site of intervention—the smallest elements of everyday habit, at the critical moment when “the status quo threatens to be preserved” (Benjamin N10,2: 474). As if slowing down the frames of a film, the passage provokes us to discover in Giles a specimen of the present-day man, and we find ourselves a bit chagrined, a bit repulsed by the “sulky hero,” the “[s]illy little boy, with blood on his boots” (107, 111). Woolf’s parenthetical, “raising his foot,” seems to call for an intervention, a question whether this gesture is necessary or natural.39 Where then, might we look for different ways of constructing a narrative? Woolf posits La Trobe as a third alternative; unlike Giles, she resists the urge to stamp her feet when her authoritarian urge is goaded—the result is that she feels a moment of agony (blood seems to pour from her shoes) but in opening herself to the collaboration of others (the audience, nature) another voice is heard, her vision is communicated, the audience responds. Unlike Bernard, La Trobe is willing to take the risk of allowing illusion to fail, to be at peace with the “death” inherent in the rhythm of life that art must continually cover over and man control (180).

39 Brecht’s description of the change in the role of the audience in epic theatre strangely echoes Woolf’s voicing of La Trobe’s audience; it also describes the effect of her snake-toad allegory:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt that too—Just like me—It’s only natural—it’ll never change—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable—That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it—that’s not the way—that’s extraordinary, hardly believable—it’s got to stop—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary—that’s great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (71)
Following a staging of Stephen Spender’s play, Trial of a Judge, Woolf noted in her diary, “Peace freedom an artist’s, not an egoist’s end” (5: 131). The interval between the acts in which this allegorical gesture appears is itself allegorical, representing “an extended interruption of this destructive symbiosis” (Ruotolo 215).

Indeed, rather than neatly diagramming “love and hate” as “peace and war,” in the allegory of the toad-snake and the allegorical interval, one might take a cue from Isa and posit the interruption of the interval as a third alternative, a new plot, “peace.” Watching the play, Isa questions whether the plot matters:

The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the center? Don’t bother about the plot: the plot’s nothing. (91)

When onstage comes “The nightingale’s song […] Love embodied,” Isa feels satiated, “It was enough. Enough. Enough,’ Isa repeated. All else was verbiage, repetition” (91). And Isa affirms the death of the plot that is powered by the binary love and hate (that is, the plot of possession) in the welcome death of the “beldame” in the pageant, an event she interprets as “Peace” (92).

In a paragraph set off from the action of the play by space breaks, we assume Woolf voices Isa’s vision: “Peace was the third emotion. Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life. Now the priest, whose cotton wool moustache confused his utterance, stepped forward and pronounced benediction” (91). Peace is the third party that interrupts the plot of “love and hate,” and the plot of peace, which has not yet been created or examined, is at the heart of Woolf’s text. Woolf’s technique of

---

40 In the late typescript, Woolf included a fourth emotion, “anguish,” and, more significantly, “death” in the earlier typescript (442).
montage, of interruption, works to create a way of seeing beyond the current plot’s cotton wool, of “life’s tangled skein,” to ask what form and matter a plot of peace might take (92). Death is the only existing model for such a plot and as such is untenable; however, death—the unknown obverse of the evanescent moment of being—also proves to be the universal grounds on which a tenable plot of peace can be built. As Isa and Lucy consider La Trobe’s vision and their own following the pageant, Isa affirms the dialectic of individual and community, unity and dispersion, articulated in La Trobe’s and Woolf’s vision of the work of art as our awareness of life itself unfolding. Isa turns from the “Yes, No” of the play to her part in the present moment sitting across from Giles, noting his “patent leather pumps,” his clichéd role and her clichéd emotions: “The father of my children, whom I love and hate.’ Love and hate—how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes . . .” (215). In interrupting a cycle in which the clash of love and hate reproduce the same martial culture, the final pages open the possibility of producing a new plot, one that rejects the relief of violent action and instead embraces the relief, more difficult to achieve, of the vision of art. The latter possibility is opened in the author and her audience relinquishing an old plot and authority. The invention of a new plot will not be achieved by a someone in the bushes, but as much by Isa’s and Giles’s own effort within the darkness of their room as it will be in La Trobe’s effort in the darkness of the public house.

Woolf’s “snake-toad” moment is made an allegory in order for her audience to see our dependence upon the romance, the old plot of war. In the story of Giles crushing the snake and toad, and in Isa’s reading of La Trobe’s staging of English history, life is
war, death is peace. Woolf’s interruption of this old plot allows us to question its hegemony. We return to the essential question of “Modern Fiction” which throws open the ground between art and the praxis of life: the writer is “constrained,” the “tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (CE 2: 106).

Nancy Topping Bazin and Jane Hamovit Lauter have argued in “Virginia Woolf’s Keen Sensitivity to War” that Woolf’s last novel “focuses on the threat war poses to civilization and, in particular, to art” (33). Certainly it does, but Bazin’s and Lauter’s reason for Woolf’s focus seems at odds with Woolf’s revolutionary understanding of the work of art: “Art is what captures the essence of the individual, the culture, or both, and giving it form renders it ‘eternal.’ Through writing books that would be preserved in libraries or creating art objects that would be placed in museums, the artist, too, gains a kind of immortality” (33). Citing “A Letter to a Young Poet” and “A Sketch of the Past,” Bazin and Lauter argue that Between the Acts is evidence of a desperate attempt to shore up that immortality. However, the text—in its formal choices and in its figural content of the artist creating a work of art that is essentially ephemeral, dependent upon subsequent interventions by audience members—seems to me precisely opposed to “creating art objects that would be placed in museums” (33). It is this claim of Woolf’s belief in the immortal, inviolate art object, I believe, that leads Bazin and Lauter to conclude that Between the Acts ends in a nihilistic vision.41 In contrast, as Three Guineas and her

41 They argue that in Isa and Giles’s final scene “[a]ll pretensions of a civilized, loving relationship have been abandoned,” and the “scene suggests a terrifying reversal—a return to
encouragement of the younger generations attest, Woolf does not seek to shore up her works of art against future ruins but invites her audience to please trespass on the grass. The creation of art should not be reserved for the few in a tower nor should the writer be confined to a tower; the work of art itself should not be static or seen as the creation of an autonomous ego. Woolf did indeed seek “immortality,” a re-membering, in transmuting experience into her art; however, she worked to create an art that would not be roped off from the audience in a museum and a literature that would not be burdened by the author’s name writ large across the page. Particularly in the late 1930s, Woolf came to see her diffusion in the web of ever evolving experience as the basis of such an immortality, thus her attraction to “anonymity.” The terrifying destruction Bazin and Lauter rightly detect in the novel’s final pages is a warning against the destruction of the interval of peace and its consequences, but it is also a clearing of the stage for a “new plot.” In honoring “the memory of the nameless” and undertaking the “arduous” effort of relinquishing authority for anonymity, as Benjamin proposed in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Woolf invites her reader onto center stage, invites them to enact such a new plot (Brodersen 262).

The tendency of later-day critics to narrow the meaning of the conclusion of *Between the Acts* to nihilism may lie partly in Mitchell A. Leaska’s influential commentary. Leaska’s annotation and editing of *Pointz Hall*, the novel’s typescripts, is

violence and passion on a primitive level” (39). If one recalls how negatively civilization (“civilization” in reality as opposed to its ideal) has been portrayed throughout the novel, a return to a primitive level (where lyric has its roots), a reversal of the hegemonic order is perhaps not so terrible a prospect. Nonetheless, they argue “[t]his final scene verifies Woolf’s vision of the likely death of civilized life—of a return to cave dwelling where nothing but survival matters. It is a dystopian vision of the future of humanity—a future in which art and personal relationships have been destroyed by war and the brutal laws of nature preside” (39).
absolutely to be admired; however, his projection of particular biographical and psychoanalytic readings on Woolf’s work can be rather confining, particularly in his reading of that final scene. In annotating the final pages of the early and late typescripts, Leaska claims that Woolf “was depicting the brute urge of the male and female animal during a time of stress about to join together in the instinctive act of procreation, a primitive coming together in the service of biological species preservation; a part of the natural cycle of birth, death, and regeneration—natural history repeating itself” (449-50). Why not allow the scene of Isa and Giles to be read on several metaphoric levels, one of which is the impulse to preserve the species? It seems that the creativity of the playwright La Trobe, who has already set the stage for this moment in imagining the new words of the new play, and the poet Isa who has asked for a new plot, are explicitly recalled in Woolf’s choice of the line to close the scene of Giles and Isa—“At last, the curtain rose. They spoke. . . .”—and thus the possibility of deconstructing and altering the “natural cycle” is held open (450).

Rather than reading the counterpoint of La Trobe’s and Isa’s different eros, the recurring poetic eros of collaborative/artistic creation, Leaska limits Isa and Giles to symbols of “fundamentally” primal procreational drives. On this darkling plain, Leaska reads the curtain raised as symbolic of Woolf seeing “imminent annihilation”; so that the line signifies “how completely V.W. had veiled and poetized her death” (450). The curtain as a metaphor has had a long history in Woolf’s work. Not unlike “the walls,” the curtain is “part good—part bad” (D 5: 304) in Woolf’s use of the metaphor, from her argument that the curtain should not shut the reader or others out but drawn them in (described in my first chapters and reiterated in Woolf’s diaries during the war [5: 340]),
to La Trobe’s rejection of curtains for her pageant to provide for chance and to blur the lines of author, text, and audience. As Woolf wrote in “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” the problem of the modern poet is his desire for “not a veil that heightens but a curtain that conceals” (CE 2: 221); *Between the Acts* lifts that curtain. However, Leaska looks no further than a letter Woolf wrote using the image of an asbestos curtain to preserve her “reading, writing, cooking” during the war (450), which sheds only partial light on the complexity of the image in the text. The primary claim of Leaska’s argument—that Woolf is preoccupied with suicide throughout its composition—and its related claims—that Woolf in the late 1930s retreated to “the high spaces of imagination” (4)—radically undercuts many of the moves *Between the Acts* makes. To read, as Leaska does in his *Afterword, “Pointz Hall [as] the longest suicide note in the English language”* (451) cannot be the final reading of this important book.

The primacy and primal nature of the final scene has positive connotations for Woolf, who describes poetry as a primal impulse and who gives Lucy’s perspective of prehistory a hopeful association: there are no barriers between nations on the merged continents, the land seethes with potential life, and humankind exists in a state of equality. Benjamin’s description of and interest in Kafka is similar: Kafka’s “world is a world theater,” centered in “the village” of exile, it is “prehistoric,” a site where new words and thus worlds are possible, where “laws and definite norms remain unwritten” (124, 131). Sharing with Woolf a use of the concept of the “primal” as recurring and potentially positive, Benjamin calls his *Arcades Project* a “Primal history of the nineteenth century” (N3a,1: 463). Benjamin’s view of Kafka in “Franz Kafka” might be
applied to Woolf’s vision in “A Sketch of the Past,” a vision illustrated in the lyric
tradition constellated on the open stage that La Trobe directs in *Between the Acts*:

In his depth Kafka touches the ground which neither “mythical divination” nor
“existential theology” supplied him with. It is the core of folk tradition […].
Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed in the
highest degree what Malebranche called “the natural prayer of the soul”: attentiveness. And in this attentiveness he included all living creatures. (134).

This ethic of attentiveness, or care, captures the mix of hope and melancholy in
Benjamin’s and Woolf’s vision. Although Benjamin only mentions the presence of
pasteboard angels in his “Franz Kafka” essay, elsewhere, in a June 12, 1938 letter to
Scholem, he links his view of Kafka’s world, “a complementary world,” with the angel of
history: Kafka’s world is at “the same level of Klee” and a

complement of his epoch, an epoch that is preparing itself to annihilate the
inhabitants of this planet on a massive scale. The experience that corresponds to
that of Kafka as a private individual will probably first become accessible to the
masses at such time as they are about to be annihilated. (224)

H.D. also contemplates the writer creating such a “complementary world,” with its
admirable running-room, or in Benjamin’s words “field for play” between the real world
and its complement (224). In *The Gift*, H.D. as narrator despairs at finding a way of
writing that would enable the individual to access the experience of the moment before
annihilation with its attendant vision of the world. Both H.D. and Benjamin imply that
being able to be in that moment and yet distant from it might enable the individual to
work toward a future in which mass annihilation would be impossible. Realizing the
difficulty of the project, these authors describe their unsatisfactory efforts of recreating
such standpoints in the very works that nonetheless attempt to do so. As Benjamin writes
in his letter, alluding to Kafka, “there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us. This
statement really contains Kafka’s hope; it is the source of his radiant serenity”—as it is for Woolf, H.D., and Benjamin (225).

As I will argue in the next chapter, for us today, that hope remains radiant; turning to these texts, we find them infused with a light compounded of our projected hope and the authors’ vision. That isn’t to say that in taking up the score we sing in chorus. Laurence concludes her study of Woolf’s “fugue of war” in Between the Acts with a reflection on critics’ divergent readings of the novel: “The structure of oppositions and the rhythm of alternation outlined in this paper are often ignored in Woolf’s work: one critic emphasizing the unity, another, the fragmentation; one highlighting the optimism, another the pessimism” (245). Is it a coincidence that her words carry the same rhythm as the key moment in Between the Acts when Woolf captures the dynamic, collaborative work that is her vision, or philosophy, of the work that art should do in a culture? This moment is the audience’s reception of La Trobe’s pageant after they have faced “now. Ourselves,” the anonymous voice has asked them to consider our roles in the construction of civilization, and music begins to play:

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind’s immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed their fingers; and others uncrossed their legs. (189)
Woolf’s critics, “one highlighting the optimism, another the pessimism,” whichever meaning they wrestle with, actualize Woolf’s vision of the engaged work of art in carrying her work forward. In Woolf’s vision, it is by entering together into the work of literature that a common belief can be created, contested, and continually recreated, and the interval of peace achieved. The dialectical work of literature—reading and writing, preserving and creating—will be a the bridge to “cross the gulf,” as she wrote in “The Leaning Tower,” but it must not be a bridge narrowed to exclude all but the elite; rather, it is a work that must be taken up by all (181).

Global war and the spectre of globalized capitalism closed the interval of Woolf’s moment. In *The Gift*, H.D. attempts to hold open a vantage point for seeing and participating in an alternative philosophy, drawing her readers to participate in the creation of that vision and thus to carry the gift into their own present. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf also reflects on this alternative economy of the gift. After the pageant, when the audience and actors have gone,

[La Trobe] could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her—for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was. And the triumph faded. Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable—it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others. (209)

The reader, both empathizing with La Trobe’s paradoxical feeling of glory in giving her gift and anguish in feeling that her gift has melted into air, nonetheless knows (as the implied author has let us hear) the audience’s response. The audience members have taken up their parts, have affirmed and questioned and carried on her gift, as Woolf’s polyphonic portrayal of their dialogues and thoughts as they departed has revealed.
Declaring it “[a] failure,” La Trobe stoops, and just at this moment of humility and despondency, chance seems to speak in counterpoint with a corresponding image of inspiration:

Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whiz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whiz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whiz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off!” (209).

The birds are evocative of La Trobe’s audience who have departed in “a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony” as they questioned, interpreted, and critiqued the pageant.

Between La Trobe and the audience had been the tree—and the pageant—and it is into this space that the birds and the audience swoop. At a third remove, if the tree might also correspond to the space of Woolf’s text, it has also proven a site for her later-day audience of common readers and academic critics to ravage, “syllabling discordantly.”

Anyone who attends a Woolf conference or reading group at a public library, or subscribes to a Woolf or modernist list-serve will recognize this image—will know first hand the mix of elation and assertion, the whiz and buzz that her texts provoke, and that is the response devoutly to be wished for by the artist. They are as equally likely to recognize, with that unease familiar to feminist scholars and first generation college students, the voices missing from the flock—the “many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (AROO 113). In that “whiz and vibrant rapture,” it is easy to forget the peculiar freedoms of the interval that a life in school grants us, the indifference of the majority to the intricate work of
preserving and creating in a culture of the life of the mind, and the shockingly swift erosion of this life in our market society.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf urged her audience of working class women to consider a philosophy, one which she would reaffirm for her own life a decade later in “A Sketch of the Past.” Woolf concludes *A Room* by reviewing her notes and criticizing her own thought process in making these notes; she finds, “my motives were not altogether selfish. There runs through these comments and discursions the conviction—or is it the instinct?—that good books are desirable and that good writers, even if they show every variety of human depravity, are still good human beings” (109). Like Benjamin who connects the “literarily correct” work with the work of the “correct political tendency” in “The Author as Producer” (221), Woolf writes, “Thus when I ask you to write more books I am urging you to do what will be for your good and for the good of the world at large. How to justify this instinct or belief I do not know, for philosophic words, if one has not been educated at a university, are apt to play one false” (109). Although I cannot rely on my standpoint as an university student to vouchsafe my affirmation of Woolf’s philosophic words, it does seem that the self-reflexive scene of the collaborative work of art in *Between the Acts* is an attempt to, if not justify, to review, criticize, and affirm this “instinct or belief” in the cultural value of creative work a decade later. My standpoint as a teacher and common reader provides me a better vantage for reaffirming Woolf’s vision, for answering “yes” to her question of whether or not the meaning of her gift has been valued and thus passed on as a work continually in progress (“Sketch” 133).
8.1 “We have an interval”

For without exception the great writers perform their combinations in a world that comes after them, just as the Paris streets of Baudelaire’s poems, as well as Dostoyevsky’s characters, only existed after 1900. (Benjamin, “One-Way Street” 65).

The renewed emphasis on montage in H.D.’s *The Gift*, Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* enabled a fuller actualization of the authors’ vision. Given their different standpoints—an American expatriate, a British “Outsider,” and a German exile—the coincidence of their vision of the function of the work that art is all the more striking. Of course, there is inevitably a gap between the author’s intentions (conscious or not) and the author’s intentions perceived by the reader—thus the phrase “implied author” has proven an expedient marker, as James Phelan has recently shown (*Living to Tell* 44-9). Thus, the vision the text communicates will inevitably appear (if at all) in the space between author and audience. H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin were more inclined than others to appreciate this gap and invite readers to
“trespass at once” into this space as a valuable kind of running-room (Woolf, CE 2: 181).¹

Indeed, the relationship the text creates between the author and the reader is a key element of these authors’ vision of the work that art should do in culture—collaborative work that “might have changed the course of history” (The Gift 168). H.D.’s past tense stands unaltered as it points to the questions of this conclusion. H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin shared a vision of the collaborative work of art as the means to critically engage with history, illuminate the stakes of the present moment, and inspire creative work for a different future. During the Second World War, they did not write believing their works would touch the “now” of their moment in history. However, they did write with a hope for an audience that would activate the critical “now” of their works in an afterwards. The question haunting these texts, which I turn to here, remains: Has the collaborative work of art actualized this vision?

The previous chapter examined the first and second levels of montage (a character’s use of montage and the implied author’s use of montage) in H.D.’s The Gift and Woolf’s Between the Acts. In this conclusion, I turn to the third level of montage in Woolf’s, H.D.’s, and Benjamin’s Second World War texts—the reader’s reconstruction and projection of the montage—in the context of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My first concern is to further articulate the vision H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin share and to show how and why their montage texts have had some success in

---

¹ I use Karl Kraus’s term “running-room” as Hal Foster has in his work to “recapture some sense of the political situatedness of artistic autonomy and its transgression […] to attempt again to provide culture with running-room,” particularly given our present consumerist loop of postmodernity, “an almost seamless circuit of production and consumption” (xiv)
communicating this vision. This partial success leads to my second concern, which is the significance of these texts’ reemergence in thinking about the aesthetics and politics of the last three decades and why we might engage with these late modernist texts today.

That these texts have a “visionary” element is attested to not only by readers but also by the reflections of the authors on their own work—in the texts themselves, related texts, and in personal writing. At the end of the 1930s, each imagined his or herself as a figure deeply concerned with and yet able to be detached from the present catastrophe. This vantage allowed each to do the work of preserving (both the beautiful and barbaric of the past and passing) and of creating (both the act itself and the transmission of the impulse to create to later readers). H.D. assumes the role Kenneth Macpherson named “recording angel” (Tribute to Freud 117); Benjamin identifies with the melancholy “angel of history” (“Theses” 257); Woolf, who asks Lehmann to join in celebrating her new identity as a “ghost” (Lehmann 38-9), makes “the present to serve as a platform to stand upon,” a smooth “surface of a deep river” of the past, to sketch her vision (“Sketch” 75, 98). The fundamentals of the vision of these late modernist texts are not new. Rather, it is a vision H.D., Benjamin, and Woolf had hypothesized, critiqued, and developed for at least two decades. What is interesting is the intensity that the ground of the Second World War lends the figuring of this vision and our reception of it. For each author the prospect of annihilation meant a distillation and communication of their philosophy as well as the aesthetic/critical form enabling such an ontology. They present themselves as between two worlds—simultaneously within the narrative of history’s unfolding and without, in the timelessness of a lyric vision—and attempt to secure this vantage in their works as a site for subsequent readers.
The vision of these high modernist texts written at the end of modernism (an end that seemed apparent even then) is thus both epistemological and ontological. In marking the transition to postmodernism, Tyrus Miller cites Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*, which delineates modernist fiction as:

predominantly “epistemological” in nature: it seeks, despite the confusing webs of psychic, perceptual, and social facts, to disclose a coherent, knowable world. Postmodernist fiction [...] invents possible worlds; postmodernist fiction is, in McHale’s terms ontological, world-making, rather than world-disclosing. (12)

Miller’s point is to show how his late modernists fall without hope between these two stools. However false this binary has proven, as McHale later noted, in the case of these high modernists in late modernism, the terms are helpful for understanding the shift in H.D.’s and Woolf’s works in the 1930s: their use of the lyric “we” rather than “I,” attention to the reader, and emphasis on the “now.” It would be inaccurate to suggest that H.D.’s and Woolf’s works are “world-making” in the same sense of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, yet their 1930s works could not pursue with the same lyric intensity the epistemological concerns of their texts of the 1920s. In the 1920s, there had been time and space for inviting readers into an alternate perspective in which the author plumbed the psychological depths, examined microcosmic details and macrocosmic connections, and soared to a nearly utopian vision of an Art Age. As Foster notes of Benjamin, “[w]hat seemed imminent in his ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934) had become utopian only four years later” (76). In the 1930s, their emphasis shifted from an epistemological self-reflexivity of the artist to an ontological self-reflexivity of the reader. That is, their texts in late modernism work to disclose visions of the world that will allow readers to realize and value their roles in “world-making.” Their effort of disclosure, however, does
not turn to didactic realism nor does it vouchsafe a coherent world. While not the apolitical formalism Peter Nicholls has suggested, these high modernists in late modernism did nonetheless seek a political engagement through form, that of lyric narrative. Their montage techniques disclose multiple perspectives, layer time and space, and engage the reader as participant. It is a lyric manipulation of narrative that refuses to resolve ambiguities, and it is precisely that refusal that critics such as Adorno (to Benjamin) and Spender (to Woolf) viewed as a fatal flaw. However, the technique’s incompleteness was vital to the vision they hoped to preserve in their texts, and regardless of the risks of cooptation, they saw this work as their most important endeavor in the face of war.

After release from a camp de concentration in Vernuche in November 1939 and despite others’ entreaties to leave, Benjamin returned to Paris, where he “had his reader’s card for the Bibliotèque National renewed so that he could proceed with his work on the ‘Arcades’ project” (Brodersen 248). There, in the winter of 1940, Benjamin wrote “On the Concept of History,” eighteen theses (printed in *Illuminations* and widely known as “Theses on the Philosophy of History”). The theses, as Benjamin has indicated, must be read as both the theoretical appurtenances to the *Arcades* as well as, as Brodersen notes, “a first approximation of a theory of history ‘from which fascism can be examined’” culminating out of “the ‘totality’ of his ‘generation’s experiences’” and his own ideas, which he had kept to and sometimes from “himself, ‘for some twenty years’” (249). Like the Second World War writings of Woolf and H.D., Benjamin’s text attempts to create a standpoint to examine fascism as the newest iteration of a recurring catastrophe that must itself finally be faced. This standpoint—and Woolf, H.D., and Benjamin provokingly
share the metaphors of island, river platform or boat, and foundering angel—is created from their personal experience of the present moment. Yet, that personal “I” is simultaneously placed under erasure, made to suffer a sea-change so that the “I” is hollowed out, become traces or the ossature of the implied author. This effacing allows the reader who enters the text to focus less on the personality and contingencies of the author (although this presence is a beguiling lure) than on a vision of the world glimpsed in a moment of transition. The reader thus enters into an orientation to history that is concerned with the microcosm of personal memory and the macrocosm of the narratives of meta-history.

Commenting on the form necessary to depart from a static universalist historicism (and implicitly the necessary departure in form in his own work), Benjamin describes a kind of lyric narrative criticism in his “Theses”: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history” (262). How then does the visionary element of these Second World War texts situate them as speaking from a moment of transition to a future moment of standstill? From the authors’ vantages—overlooking a deep past from the platform of the present—the possible transitions were multiple and interconnected and inflected their works. In the “stand still” moments occasioned by the war, they foresaw a transition in culture, a transition in modernist aesthetics, and a transition from life into death. Although fascism was clearly the most pressing cultural transition, another—the complete ascendance of unfettered capitalism—also loomed large on the horizon, so pervasive as to be almost indistinct. Indeed, the moment of transition might be more accurately described as the
end of a moment of transition. Attested to by the cries of the earnest, Leftist writers’
efforts in the thirties, capitalism’s relentless, headless march toward unmediated
hegemony also heralded the transition in aesthetics to postmodernism. This transition
meant the loss of the running-room that modernist art had offered between our experience
of the world and the commodity loop. The personal transition these authors faced, the
likelihood of their deaths, intensified their desire to set down works that might hold open
this moment of cultural and aesthetic transition, to provide a site for readers to envision
other ways of being in the world. In laying down traces of the intense emotions
experienced in facing “final realities” in lyric fragments, they hoped to charge the
reader’s experience of the text’s proposed vision.

Throughout the 1930s, H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin had been engaged in
considering aesthetic and political cultural shifts. However, the return of World War
marked a shift as definitive as that experienced in the Great War. Foreseeing these
transitions and looking back at the accumulated work of their previous years, these three
writers focused in their works on the effort of communicating their vision. The “shock”
of the return of war and the material realities of life in wartime instigated in reality the
metaphoric standstill Benjamin theorized in imagining the writing of history. Benjamin’s
“Theses on the Philosophy of History” articulates not only the methodology of his then
unfinished Arcades Project but also the critical orientation he intends the site of the
Arcades to create for his reader. Readers entering the Arcades are to take up the vision of
an historical materialist approach (a methodology markedly different from those of
Benjamin’s predecessors and contemporaries). In thesis “XVII,” Benjamin writes that
“[a] historical materialist approaches a subject only where he encounters it as a monad,”
and it is the arrangement of such encounters that make up the constellations of his

*Arcades*: “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (262-3). The form suggested by the material amassed for the *Arcades*, a form which is deployed in his “Theses,” performs this imaginative historical materialist methodology.² Benjamin approaches a subject—“Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” for example—and offers a “flow” of fragments, arranged not unlike the associative flow of thought, Socratic dialogue, or the counterpoint of a fugue. In the montage of these fragments, the reader locates his or her nodal points, until coming upon an image, quote, or thought which touches the reader as charged with a particular meaning—thinking is arrested in the shock of recognition. In this moment of “shock” or “stand still,” the reader is held by the tensions of this constellation, a constellation activated by his or her particular and temporal standpoint, and a meaning “flashes up” (“Theses” 255).³

---

² In “Remains to Be Seen,” Stanley Cavell’s review of *The Arcades Project* in *ArtForum* (April 2000), Cavell describes his experience of this: form or texture—with its citations, often multiple, ranging from a sentence to a long paragraph, from more than 800 texts, mostly French, otherwise German, bearing on the life and works of Paris through the nineteenth century, interspersed at varying intervals with on or more similarly sized omens of Benjamin’s own, all collected into thirty-six ‘convolutes.’ (31)

³ In this thesis describing the sudden and contingent apparition of “truth” to the reader/critic, Benjamin quotes Gottfried Keller, “The truth will not run away [escape] from us” (255). Much of Convolute N, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” in the *Arcades Project* is distilled in the “Theses,” including Keller’s quote. In the context of the “Theses” and Convolute N, Benjamin plays upon the dual meanings of the citation—the simple insistence on finding the truth, and the understanding of the subjective nature of truth. Three fragments above his quotation of Keller in Convolute N, Benjamin notes, “Resolute refusal of the concept of ‘timeless truth’ is in order” (N3,2: 463).
As shown in the previous chapter, H.D. models a similar methodology in *The Gift*, where her narrator’s montage of memory serves the reader as micro and macrocosmic images of the development of the individual and of civilizations. In the final chapter of *The Gift*, the shock of the possibility of annihilation in the Blitz occasions a standstill moment for narrator, author, and reader who become responsible for the success or failure of the transmission of the “Gift,” a “vision of [creative] power and of peace” (214). The visionary element of *The Gift*, particularly its spiritual dimension, had largely been excised in its first published edition (New Directions 1982); citing Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Jane Augustine emphasizes this dimension in her introduction to the unabridged text (University Press of Florida 1998) which allows the gift to stand as “more than creativity, more than heritage, more than talent”; it is an “instrument,” “some visionary capacity of profound social and historical use in a redemptive drama” (2). Benjamin shared with Woolf and H.D. a conviction that his work was itself an essential counter to the status quo of the present and the future; he writes in January 11, 1940 to Gershom Scholem, “Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it—is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness” (262). In actualizing a redemptive drama, the visionary element of these works (however uncomfortable it makes scholars and critics) was nonetheless firmly rooted in the secular, in bodies communicating over and through texts in the real. The

---

4 This is not to suggest that Benjamin’s suicide should be attributed to a vision that his work would be preserved in posterity. Rather, a letter to Scholem on March 14, 1939 reveals Benjamin’s real desire to survive and his pessimism regarding posterity: “the rewards of posterity [are] too uncertain. The crucial thing now is to survive the interim” (249). A month earlier, he had mused, “What will we leave behind someday, other than our own writings with their uncut pages?” (243).
standstill moments of these texts are their acts of communion. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf also creates two key standstill moments in the audience’s response to a song and in La Trobe’s vision of a tree. However, it is in the standstill moments of “A Sketch of the Past” that Woolf reflects on the significance of the creative power in communicating a vision that might move us toward peace. Here she also affirms her belief in the importance of her work as a counter to war: “this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else” (“Sketch” 73).

Woolf wrote “A Sketch of the Past” as a kind of memoir, frequently beginning entries with a meditation on the present moment of writing (begun 18 April 1939 and last dated 17 November 1939). The present moment, as Woolf writes, serves as a platform for plumbing the depths of memory. Like *Between the Acts* which Leonard Woolf edited and published, “A Sketch of the Past” was unfinished at her death. Jeanne Schulkind edited the text from two typescripts; a first edition was published in 1976, and a second in 1985 in the collection *Moments of Being*. Like H.D. in *The Gift*, Woolf incorporates the techniques of cinematic montage and psychoanalysis, and reflects on this technique, in a series of sketches that open moments from the past and examine those experiences in the light of the present. Woolf continually draws us to consider the beauty, peculiarities,

---

5 As her diaries attest (V: 248), Woolf was thoughtfully reading Freud in December 1940, and she refers to her reading in the “Sketch of the Past” entry titled “The present. June 19th 1940” in her attempt to describe her father: “But in me, though not in [Nessa], rage alternated with love. It was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling; and is called ambivalence” (108).
and difficulties of communicating remembered moments—whether an early trauma, a child’s vision of “an air-ball or a shell,” or the manifold “invisible presences” who influence our daily choices (such as her mother’s as she wrote *To the Lighthouse*) (78, 80). Not content with narrating these memories, Woolf asks us to consider “how I shape it,” a montage of colours, sounds, human beings, “how I see myself as a child,” and “the innumerable things left out in my sketch,” and the unreliability of her own descriptions which are unequal parts fact and fiction (79).

Woolf begins her “memoirs” by characteristically plunging into a mode of writing unconventional for a memoir. Rather than begin with chronology and heritage, she begins with a “first memory,” reflects on the difficulties of the memoir writer, analyzes the nature of memory, and describes a second intense and sensual memory (64-5). Woolf’s method echoes Benjamin’s historical materialist, who would choose another way, would stop “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” to instead grasp “the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (“Theses” 263). In addition to sharing the concept of the constellation (a simultaneity of fragments, a sublation of the technique of surrealism), Woolf and Benjamin share the metaphor of the depth of the past that the present stands upon as well as an approach to “History” from an obscure angle. Benjamin writes to Scholem of the *Arcades*, his “attempt to retain the image of history in the most inconspicuous corners of existence—the detritus of history,” “These reflections anchor the history of nineteenth-century art in the recognition of their situation as experienced by us in the present” (165, 171). Indeed, Woolf’s montage technique in writing the memoir as well as the nature of her observations regarding her Victorian childhood make a striking comparison to
Benjamin’s “Berliner Kindheit um 1900.” In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin describes the work he has begun as “a series of sketches” of “childhood memories” that are “not in the form of a chronicle, but rather portray individual expeditions into the depths of memory” (19).

Reflecting on the seeming random aspect of memory (it is indeed connected with one’s own era or moment of remembering), Woolf formulates her theory of moments of being embedded in great swaths of “this cotton wool, this non-being” (71). Woolf associates the moments of being with “a sudden violent shock,” which seems to secure the moment as an indelible emotional trace in memory (71). Woolf describes a constellation of three such early moments that stand out in memory, noting that two “ended in a state of despair,” whereas the other “in a state of satisfaction” (70). Woolf focuses on the latter, when she had been in the garden at St. Ives looking at a flower and said “That is the whole” (a moment beautifully captured in George’s moment in the garden at Pointz Hall in Between the Acts) (71). Whereas in the moments that ended in despair Woolf had felt “quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other, that a man I had seen had killed himself,” “in the case of the flower,” Woolf “found a reason,” “was conscious—if only at a distance—that I should in time explain it” (72). It is the power of reason and of imagination to connect, to counter passive reception that “blunts the sledge-hammer blow” of the shock, a power that she has found grows with age (72). It is the dialectic of this “shock-receiving capacity” and her power to “make it real” and “whole” “by putting it into words” that Woolf supposes makes her “a writer” (72). Woolf is not at pains to illustrate this in “A Sketch of the Past” merely in order to illuminate her particular genius; the personal experience and reflection here
inevitably moves toward inclusion, toward the reader. The impulse and process Woolf describes is not inaccessible to common readers; indeed, many readers attest to a feeling of recognition and liberation in reading her description of “moments of being.” Woolf deconstructs her own process as a writer in an attempt to draw the reader into the act of writing history. It is the dialectic of vulnerable reception and immune creation that is the means toward Woolf’s vision—her “philosophy”—and her means to counter the return to war (72).

What is Woolf’s philosophy? It is seeing, recognizing, “the whole world is a work of art” (72). And here we must slow down, as H.D. does, ask the frames to move in “[s]low-motion. Slower and slower” (Gift 120), admitting the limitations of communicating this vision in the form of academic prose: “and then . . . music? O, what I meant/ by music when I said music, was—” (Trilogy 85). The standstill moment in “A Sketch of the Past” is Woolf’s attempt to testify to this vision, as well as to transmit it in the music of her prose. Before attempting to translate that vision here, however, I want to sound out what is at stake for Woolf and for the reader in how this vision connects the work of art and the real. Woolf explains that the “blow” of a “shock” provokes her “desire to explain it,” and thus in this engaged mode the shock is no longer a random blow from the obscuring chaos of “the cotton wool of daily life” (72). As a writer, an active participant who lays hands upon the experience of living, the blow “is or will become a revelation of some order;” and within the order of the sentence following this semi-colon we see the blow transformed from potential revelation to a reality: “it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words”
Woolf frankly describes her “great delight” in transforming the shocks into words, into a “whole,” depriving the blow of its pain and enabling the “rapture” of putting “the severed parts together” (72).

To some, this admission is telling of a high modernist vision that appears increasingly naïve in the context of late modernism. Alan Wilde argues that late modernist texts reject high modernism’s “embracing vision in which the contradictions of modern life would be resolved” (119). Yet, Wilde acknowledges the poignancy of “the fractious modernist monster,” high modernism’s “generosity and breadth—its desire to restore significance to a broken world” (119). To some, Woolf’s reflection on the work of writing may sound like a defense mechanism, an inability to face the real world that diverts Woolf from the “real” to focus on the immense satisfaction of “managing and containing it” in literary form (Jameson, AP 202). Moreover, the satisfactions of this writerly activity would seem a “pleasure” of privilege, available only to Woolf since the reader presumably receives the already tightly knitted “whole” and is given only the pleasure of admiring its seamlessness (“Sketch” 72). However, the texts themselves resist both diagnoses.

According to Tyrus Miller, one of the tenets of high modernism had been “the possibility of redeeming tradition through its transfiguration into art” (45). In late modernism, the redemption of the modernist tradition (for these particular modernists)

---

6 The ambiguity of this sentence is significant. On the one hand, Woolf sees “a token of some real thing behind appearances”; on the other hand, it is her seeing that “make[s] it real” (72). This môbius strip of subjective perception (echoed in Benjamin’s methodology in his concept of history) should not, however, turn us toward the flat relativism of postmodernism. Rather, the point is to foreground the subject’s standpoint, the agency one takes in writing history (stringing a web between fact and fiction), and to invite readers to enter into and take up that work.
would lie in its ability to transfigure the future world by means of the interruptive vision of the avant-garde work. Put simply, the ideal future that H.D., Woolf, and Benjamin ultimately desired was one of peace, understanding, and an experience of life that was rich and varied (i.e. not reduced to commodity exchange). The vision transmitted in both form and content through their montage texts would, ideally, open a way toward that future by serving the reader as a site for contemplating the past and future and for engaging with the present. The incompleteness of the texts also meant the reader would connect with a community of readers, past, present, and future who enter into the work of the text. The authors’ vision of an ideal future would mean the possibility of art’s redemption in becoming the “common ground” (Woolf CE 2: 178) rather than an arena of privilege; it would mean the coming (if we worked for it) of an “Art Age” focused on mutual creation rather than destruction (H.D. CU 114). By writing the world differently, these high modernists could not transform the world (that would indeed be magical thinking). However, by writing in such a way that draws readers to see the world and their living in it differently, these writers make possible acts of transfiguration—placing the reader in touch with fact and fiction, reality and possibility, in their roles of writing the future. In both Between the Acts and “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf’s challenge—which I argue she succeeds in—is to create texts that: on the one hand, provide the barest sketch of the possibility of an obscured “whole” (aesthetic, social, political) and the pleasure in the work of creating it by connecting with others; and, on the other hand, resist the “whole” of the total work of art by leaving the connections between the arranged, “severed” fragments open to the reader’s agency. Woolf’s text itself must contain a deconstructive movement and seduce the reader into an active role of
productive participation if it is to open the way toward an actualization of peace and understanding, that is, a movement from theory to practice.

Echoing H.D.’s narrator in *The Gift*, Woolf notes the “breaks” that the interruptions of July 1939 occasion and how they threaten to “be the end of this memoir” (98). In “Sketch,” as in H.D.’s novel, montage becomes a necessary technique for continuing to write in an environment of interruptions, darkness, and adversity.7 However, montage serves the writers’ vision in two additional ways. First, it allows these authors a swiftness in reaching the desired state of consciousness (able to plumb memory and take imaginative flight) for crafting the lyric narrative texts they valued.8 Second, montage allows them to incorporate their particular “now” into the text. After reflecting on the interruptions that have marked the end of the previous entry and the beginning of her “19th July 1939” entry, Woolf writes, “I was thinking about Stella as we crossed the Channel a month ago. I have not given her a thought since” (98). That is to say, she has not been able to think of her since. As in H.D.’s descriptions of the paralyzing focus on the shallow “now” that the air raids bring and thus her inability to make the leap into memory or creative work, in Woolf’s experience, “[t]he past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep

7 In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin similarly explains his choice of montage as technique: “first, by the materially threatened, precarious nature of my work and, second, by considerations as to its commercial prospects. Moreover, the subject matter seems absolutely to demand this form” (19).

8 Woolf writes, “any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters. […] So I write this […] partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface. Let me then, like a child advancing with bare feet into a cold river, descend again into that stream” (“Sketch” 98).
then one sees through the surface to the depths” (98). Woolf is not yearning for an escape route into the past from a present fractured by war; rather,

In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. (98)

The “now” that H.D. and Woolf thus secure in these texts is composed of the experience of this “deep” past in relation to a present moment that presses so close that it threatens suffocation. Their self-reflexivity on this paradoxical position allows Woolf and H.D. to project their presence beyond the time of the text. That is, in their self-reflexivity on method and in foregrounding positionality, as implied authors they also look down upon themselves from a space above or beyond the platform or boat on the river, suspended like Benjamin’s angel of history. This vantage, where reader and implied author look on side by side, is the desired goal of Benjamin’s “Theses.”

Benjamin’s claim is that historical materialism must reject deterministic theory, must realize that the recurring catastrophes of history concur with not only dominant ideology but also the impotency of dominant political viewpoints. In order to reject that self-perpetuating concept of history, the historical materialist must turn to methods for writing history quite outside disciplinary norms—devices more readily associated with the work of art (particularly the modernist use of memory, cinema, and psychoanalysis) and the theological.9 His first thesis echoes a note in Convolute N of the Arcades: “in

---

9 In Convolute N, Benjamin likens the site of art with the vantage of the angel of history: “In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art” can provide a model of the true definition
remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological”; the experience of “remembering something,” itself a messianic experience, provides a model for writing history (N8,1: 471; emphasis added). Through the “now” of writing—that is, remembering the past and considering its connection to, and at a moment of, threatened annihilation in the Second World War—Benjamin, Woolf, and H.D. embed their texts with models of the method that enables their desired vision.

Since these texts are addressed to an after, hailing a reader beyond the closed-in horizon of their present, Woolf and H.D. are able to create implied author personas that hover at the reader’s shoulder—invisible presences haunting the present moment of our reading. Just below the shocks of “the battle […] at its crisis” (which are most frequently described at the openings of her dated entries) are the complicated depths of beauty Woolf evokes in her moments of being; as readers we view them side by side (“Sketch” 100). Desiring to enter into the work of experiencing, of questioning, of securing the moment of being and aware of the “breaks” that destroy “the fullness of life” yet drive us to register it, we find at our shoulder Woolf prompting us to consider our ethics in the present moment: “But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary” (98). Here are the joys and profundities found in the rich web of life, the implied Woolf seems to say, and here are the bombs and banalities, the results of an ethic that would cut us off from such a continuous tradition and that heralds a global order in which all is surface. From Woolf’s vantage, we are allowed to call the bombs “unreal” of progress, which “has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences—where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn” (N9a,7: 474)
and ascribe the moments of being the status of “reality,” a reality that deserves our working for it (72).

Later in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf again comes up from her “scenes” of memory to reflect on her writing: “These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device—a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads” (142). Rather, “scene making” has always been Woolf’s “natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative” (142). This surfacing, the emerging pattern or corks marking a submerged net, “confirms” Woolf’s “instinctive notion—it is irrational; it will not stand argument” that we (and she is at pains to emphasize “we”) are parts of a work of art, that our experiences of “reality,” our moments of being, are “made of something permanent” (142). Similarly, in Tribute to Freud, H.D. comments on her montage of memories, which surface in dialogue with Freud, as “a work of art”:

> We travel far in thought, in imagination or in the realm of memory. Events happened as they happened, not all of them of course, but here and there a memory or a fragment of a dream-picture is actual, is real, is like a work of art or is a work of art. I have spoken of the two scenes with my brother as remaining set apart, like transparencies in a dark room, set before lighted candles. Those memories, visions, dreams, reveries—or what you will—are different. […] They are healing. They are real. […] But we cannot prove they are real. […] there are priceless broken fragments that are meaningless until we find the other broken bits to match them. (35)

For H.D., the work of art brings to the surface the “priceless broken fragments” of a culture’s unconscious. The work of the author is to compose these fragments in such a way that the reader can make use of them, is compelled by them to “find the other broken bits,” or is compelled in finding these “other broken bits” already in his or herself. The Gift employs the “we” of H.D.’s “Writing on the Wall,” drawing the reader to inhabit a
role of both analyst and analysand, traveling far—from a detail of childhood memory to a
culture’s meta-narratives—in the task of discovering meaning. Like *Between the Acts*,
*The Gift* thus illuminates the many forces implicated in building civilization, provides a
space for imagining a way of building a civilization differently, and calls on readers to
enter into that work. The latter is accomplished particularly through the author’s self-
effacement, which inspires the reader to intervene in the work—both the text and the
work of world-making.

In *The Gift*, H.D. obliquely describes the importance of seeming to remove herself
as a barrier between the work and the reader. The child Hilda recalls looking through
passing bulrushes while riding in a boat, an image like the gyroscope alluded to earlier in
the novel and evocative of her method: “(like looking through the slats in a fence) you
saw what was there, you knew that something was reminded of something. That
something remembered something. That something came true in a perspective and a
dimension […] that was final” (126; emphasis added). As “I” gives way to “you” (the
“we” of the reader and implied author), and as even these pronouns give way to the
objects of observation (“something remembered something”), the “I” of the text
increasingly becomes a conduit serving the reader. The personality of the author is
effaced so that the reader can enter into the (messianic) work of connection, of
“remembering something” (Benjamin N8,1: 471). Thus, we may become the Moses-
figure glimpsed between the slats of the memory, or we may take up H.D.’s authorial role
of connecting the allusion of Moses (something) to Freud’s work (something) and in that
connection, glimpse the new plot and new words that such thinking could enable. H.D.’s
refraction of authorial identity (H.D. as figural narrator, Hilda, H.D. as author/Editor, as
recording angel) makes it impossible to pin down the author in fact; the author’s identity and intent must remain elusive, must haunt the reader.

Of course, in Benjamin’s and Woolf’s case, the literal deaths of the author must be taken into account when considering our views and interests in these “unfinished” texts. The fact of and our fascination with their biographical narratives of breakdown (Woolf, H.D.) and suicide (Woolf, Benjamin) has succeeded far beyond any lyric self-erasures or narrative seductions of the texts themselves in attracting an increasing audience of readers. Indeed, the onus of transmission many scholars attest to feeling toward these texts is no doubt partly engendered by the tragedy of the loss of these creative minds. Reviewing the English translation of the Arcades in 2000, Stanley Cavell asks why Benjamin has acquired such an “intensity” of interest today: “Is it that his isolation, expressed in his unforgettable suicide, is now become legible?” (35). Cavell’s reading of Benjamin’s suicide through his work (and vice versa) concludes his review:

Why make a work that cannot be written to an end? Perhaps to remind the writer of a reason to suffer awakening without end. [...] The Arcades Project, constructive, modernist, and unending, is not so much an argument against suicide as it is an attestation, so long as the work can continue that deprives suicide of its point. (35)

Moreover, our retrospective reading of their deaths beside their reconstructed works cannot fail to powerfully affect how we read those works. This isn’t to say, however, that these texts would not have become so prominent if Benjamin and Woolf had not killed themselves shortly after (or during the process of) writing them. The important point is that Benjamin and Woolf are particularly haunting presences to readers today not

---

10 Sybil Oldfield’s Afterwords: Letters on the Death of Virginia Woolf provides a clear and striking account of the political and cultural climate Between the Acts was first read in, particularly the effects of The Sunday Times misreporting of Woolf’s suicide note.
simply because of their suicides (there are innumerable suicides that do not haunt us), but
because of the vision they attempted to convey through their texts—a vision and attempt
at communicating intensified in these texts by the very forces implicated in their choice
of suicide. While I would prefer that common readers would come to Woolf’s work or
Benjamin’s theory because of their reputations of intellectual skill and revolutionary
vision, I do recognize that coming to the works because of the narrative lure of their
biographical suicides leads to the same objective, that is, more readers engaged, more
readers projecting the text into their present, more possibilities for making its vision come
“true” in another dimension.

8.2 Here and Now

On July 9, 2005, I witnessed Woolf’s texts functioning in the way she, Benjamin,
and H.D. theorized—“something remembered something”—and an incident marking the
increasing success of Woolf’s work in reaching common readers. Sitting in a waiting
room, I regretted having forgotten a book, but was somewhat relieved by a radio at my
elbow tuned to a public radio station. While my eyes skimmed the surfaces of a glossy
magazine, my ears pricked at the host’s discussion of reactions to the London bombings
two days previous. As a montage of clips of the reactions of “world leaders”—Prime
Minister Blair, President Bush, Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—played and was
followed by a professor’s “how-to” on a proper leader’s response to crisis, I became less
interested, that is, until the phrase “literary history” caused me to refocus my mind
(which had drifted to the American insistence on comparing the bombing to the Blitz) on
the broadcast. Stuart Clarke, a name I recognized, was being interviewed by phone
regarding the double-decker bus bombed just beside Tavistock Square—a square with a far-reaching literary history (Dickens as well as Woolf lived there, and it is also a site of several memorials dedicated to peace, commemorating Hiroshima, Conscientious Objectors, Woolf herself, and Gandhi). Clarke read Woolf’s account of making up *To the Lighthouse* one day on a walk around the square; he then read, movingly, a passage from Woolf’s diary regarding the sights in London during the Blitz, and particularly the bombing of what had been the Woolfs’ home at Tavistock Square, an entry written October 20, 1940:

> a heap of ruins. Three houses, I shd. say gone. Basement all rubble. Only relics an old basket chair (bought in Fitzroy Sqre days) & Penmans board To Let. Otherwise bricks & wood splinters. One glass door in the next door house hanging. I cd just see a piece of my studio wall standing: otherwise rubble where I wrote so many books. Open air where we sat so many nights, gave so many parties. The hotel not touched. (331)

Something of the scene remembers something at the scene Clarke witnesses (a scene we have all witnessed, on television, on the web, the front pages of newspapers). It is profoundly affecting to hear him read it. Or is it only me? Is it only my writing about Woolf in 1940 just now that makes it affecting? I scan the faces of the others in the room: two women have paused in their conversation to listen, an older man catches my eye and holds it briefly, a mask, a young man flipping magazine pages restlessly may or may not have been listening. The women resume talking, “Now, who is she?” “Virginia Woolf?” “Right, it’s familiar.” “She was that one in that movie… *The Hours.*” “Oh, right. The one that was Nicole Kidman.” “Killed herself.”

Two years ago, this dialogue would have infuriated me—from the haunting presence of Nicole Kidman’s prosthetic nose to the pinning of Woolf’s identity with the
label “suicide.” But in those two years, and the many discussions inside and outside the classroom that I have taken part in, I have happily relinquished this protectiveness toward “my Woolf” and can even be pleased that Cunningham’s Woolf and its screen incarnation might lead these women to discover their own Woolf, that is, ideally, to open one of her books. A new story came on the radio program, and I began thinking again of Clarke’s reading. I can’t help but feel that this kind of work—and by this, I mean the “academic” work of reading, connecting, interpreting texts—is important. In contrast to the discussion of how a leader should act (proper eye-contact, physical presence as an authority) at such a time, the kind of thinking that Clarke’s reading and reflecting on the Tavistock Square bomb engenders seems to me of much greater consequence. Woolf’s claim in “A Sketch of the Past,” that in writing she is “doing what is far more necessary than anything else” should war come (73), has been a claim that I and others have echoed when our foundations as literary academics (who, as writers and teachers, transmit others’ writing) are shaken by world crisis—on September 11, 2001, on July 7, 2005. In the waiting room, I questioned this claim once again, and thus Woolf’s as well. However, I am led to reaffirm it. This response to the crisis—of pausing to see the crisis from the perspective of Woolf’s words, the hope that the recent debris will soon be removed and the square returned to a communal space for contemplating peace, marked as it is by a palimpsest of scars—is as valuable, if not more so, as the predominant response of polarizing rhetoric and military bravado. While the latter response may be more profitable in terms of national and commodity capital, I believe (and I believe that many of the others who do the work of re-membering, transmitting, and interpreting these texts share this vision) that this work is ultimately more “profitable” for the collective.
Woolf’s text becomes a site to engage with the present in a way that is an alternative to the established paths of hate and divisiveness; here we can register our emotions, consider the standpoints of others, question what has led to this particular present, and finally value the complexity of the weave of an individual’s life in the world so that we retain a hope and desire for a different future.

Whereas in times of calm, the “breaks” of Woolf’s text remind us of the danger of acquiescing to the status quo; in times of crisis, Woolf’s text takes us to a platform just beyond the immediate moment, which presses so close upon us. It cannot tell us how to react to the crisis, and reading and discussing the text will not causally bring about peace. However, Woolf’s text can (and does) hold us in a dialectic between two worlds where our own agency comes to the fore. Woolf’s text can create an island in the center of a storm that might enable us to see our present as backed by the past and to consider our agency in shaping the future. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf also confronts her claim that writing is a necessary, useful response to the war, shaken by the “breaks” that interrupt her remembering and her life with Leonard. Having described an unpleasant memory of her father at St. Ives, Woolf notes that despite that “old grievance” the place also gave them at the same time “‘pure delight’ which is before my eyes at this very moment” (133). The sensuous memories of St. Ives become the moment of writing at Monks House, or, put differently, the moment of being on September 22, 1940 remembers the moment at St. Ives in childhood: “While I write this the light glows; an apple becomes a vivid green; I respond all through me; but how?” Woolf seems unable to write quickly enough, to record the flight of self-critique, to compound her many attempts to discover and record the nature of the moment, of being:
Then a little owl [chatters] under my window. Again, I respond. Figuratively I could snapshot what I mean by some image; I am a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays; and so on. Or I fumble with some vague idea about a third voice; I speak to Leonard; Leonard speaks to me; we both hear a third voice. Instead of labouring all the morning to analyse what I mean, to discover whether I mean anything real, whether I make up or tell the truth when I see myself taking the breath of these voices in my sails and tacking this way and that through daily life as I yield to them, I note only the existence of this influence; suspect it to be of great importance (133)

The influence, difficult to pin down, lies in that which Woolf responds to—the moments of being discovered in the light, the ripening apple, the owl, the hearing a third voice together with Leonard, the breath of other voices. Woolf’s question, the wobble indicating how her foundations are being battered and the strength of her “instinct” that pulls her around, is whether or not this deep, overwhelming, immensely vivid reality is only hers. To return to the quote:

cannot find how to check its [this influence’s] power on other people—does Louie feel it? Does Percy? Which of the people watching the incendiary bomb extinguished on the hill last night would understand what I mean if they read this?—I erect a finger post here, to mark a vein I will some time try to work out; and return to the surface; that is St Ives. (133)

We return to this “finger post,” Woolf’s unanswered questions, as readers drawn to the vision of her work. Woolf’s question of whether her feeling is shared is understood in her effort to communicate; it calls to us. It remembers to us our own experiences of wanting to surmount the barrier of the self, the experiential “I.” My own such experience stood out vividly in my mind, when two years previous, I had sat in a different waiting room, this time reading, or rather re-reading, the “Conclusion” of Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*. I looked about the quite full room, the anxious child, the weary elderly man, and, intoxicated by Pater’s writing as it plucked my emotions, I had asked nearly the same question as Woolf, but it was the question of the sympathetic
reader desiring affirmation—who here would see what I see when I read this? The passage from Woolf’s diary glimpsed through the slats of the context of that particular waiting room “now” remembered, somehow, the passage from Pater’s “Conclusion.” But I pause here, erect a finger post, to mark a connection that I will try to work out, and return now to the haunting presence of these texts and their implied authors.

Woolf had increasingly become aware of the value of this haunting presence. In her diary, May 9, 1934, Woolf describes a trip to Warwickshire: “Yes, everything seemed to say, this was Shakespeare’s, had he sat & walked; but you wont find me not exactly in the flesh. He is serenely absent-present; both at once; radiating round one; yes; in the flowers, in the old hall, in the garden; but never to be pinned down” (D 4: 219). In “A Sketch of the Past,” she reflects on the power of “invisible presences” in our lives (both ideologies and individuals), and like H.D. in The Gift, recalls a childhood encounter with poetry that informs her belief in art today: reading a poem from The Golden Treasury in Kensington Gardens,

instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. I was so astonished that I tried to explain the feeling. “One seems to understand what it’s about”, I said awkwardly. […] no one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true. Nor does that give the feeling. It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets on the scent. (93)

Despite her claim that “no one could have understood” and “[n]or does that give the feeling,” Woolf’s experience resonates with many readers, with my own experience reading Pater, reading Woolf. When asked to write about their first significant experience reading, students in my composition courses frequently echo Woolf’s and
H.D.’s descriptions of the experience of reading a text (as often aloud before others as alone) as a powerful encounter, a pivotal life experience. One is tempted to say of these recorded experiences, in which passive and active voice pivot around each other, that the text, swanlike, overpowers the reader (a kind of Leda) “with a sudden blow” (Yeats 214). However, and as Woolf and H.D. emphasize, it is their own empowerment as readers that my students attest to and are awed by. The text seems to be “coming true,” yes, but it is their reading—their seeing, seizing, and projecting the text—that makes this dormant “truth” come.

Even in the somber context of these Second World War texts, it would be wrong to politely pass over the erotics of the high modernists’ take on the experience of reading since the ambivalent embrace of _eros_ and _thanatos_ plays such an important role in their vision. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf’s description of her “philosophy” of moments of being is redolent with a kind of communal autoeroticism: “we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality,” and this scene, this moment flooded with life, is some “reality,” something “permanent” that shows against the negative of death, of not-being (142). H.D.’s and Woolf’s texts do not merely narrate the ecstatic sense of connection achieved in an act of communication (whether communing with a text, with nature, or with an other), but also they seek to approximate that embrace with the reader through the lyric doubling of the text itself. The metaphor of binary stars in Woolf’s “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points” and H.D.’s _The Gift_ is doubled in the relationship of implied author and reader. In this paradigm, the emphasis is not on the power of the author to dominate the reader, but on the transmission of knowledge, the exchange
between the author’s energy in devising the text and the reader’s energy in activating and making “sense” of the text. Thus the emphasis falls on the empowerment of the reader who, in turn, breathes life not only into the text but also the implied author. Indeed, in these texts it is the silence and withholding of the other (Fanny’s teacher Julia, Hilda’s grandmother Mamalie) that draws and sustains readers’ interest.

The ambiguities and silences of the modernist text in general have hailed an ever increasing readership to enter into the work of these works—critiquing, questioning, translating, counteracting, uncovering, smoothing over, transmitting, and so on. However, Woolf’s, H.D.’s, and Benjamin’s Second World War texts have tended to provoke an unparalleled intensity of response by readers who find themselves drawn to them. It is the reach beyond the orbit of the text (the author and reader), the interstices of the compound “now” so key in these texts, that creates that intensity. Those who have done the difficult work of editing and publishing these texts testify to the strange embrace of the work. Lola L. Szladits, curator at the Berg collection, begins “A Personal Note” in the front matter of *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts* with a testament to its power:

*Between the Acts* is personally mine because I cannot forget it. More than any other of Virginia Woolf’s novels, the novel took hold of me in every sense of the word, including physical contact. The closeness was caused by circumstances beyond my control and by an effort which had me possess this novel almost as one would one’s own creation. Or did *Between the Acts* possess me? (ix)

Stanley Cavell’s question, “Why make a work that cannot be written to an end?” and Lola Szladits’s question, “Or did *Between the Acts* possess me?” are questions that point to the haunting formal strategies of these works. Rolf Tiedemann in his introduction, “Dialectics at a Standstill,” to the first German publication of the *Arcades*, describes the
text as a kind of embryonic architecture made real by the reader’s work of interpretation. He describes the reader’s work of bringing that architecture to life as messianic:11 “For the reader endowed with such an imagination,” that is, Benjamin’s imagination and the kind that the nature of the text hails, “the dead letters Benjamin collected from the holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale will come to life” (931-32). Benjamin scholars who have done the work of publishing and translating the Arcades and preserving its essentially fragmentary form, like Szladits, and Augustine editor of The Gift, relate to the text as intimate readers but also play the role of “recording angels”—safeguarding and making possible the journey of the text from archive to common reader. On that journey they find themselves overwhelmed—lost in the labyrinth, seduced by the traces of this other mind—and, yet, in that very close contact with the emerging “vision” of the text, they are empowered and driven on in their role of caretakers.

The editors’ desire to be “true to” the intentions of Benjamin, Woolf, and H.D., particularly in preserving the essential ambiguities and fragmentary form of the texts, attests to the power of the authors’ vision and has abetted the texts’ chances to “come true” as other readers enter into and project that vision upon their own present. Despite the strong impulse to state one’s vision or philosophy didactically in the face of possible annihilation, Woolf, Benjamin, and H.D. recognized the contradiction of form and content that such an impulse would give rise to. Since an audience made active through a participatory poetics was essential to their vision, these texts could not resort to the

11 Tiedemann describes the existing text as the outline for a building “whose foundations are just being dug,” attests to the temptation to publish only Benjamin’s “sparkling aphorisms and disturbing fragments” rather than including the “oppressive chunks of quotations as well,” and finally takes up the role of guide for navigating Benjamin’s “labyrinth” by giving us a sense of “the architecture of the whole,” an architecture realized by the reader’s transit (931).
closure of narrative or of linear, expository judgments without defusing that vision. Particularly for Woolf and Benjamin, their texts had to convey their sense (in the “now” of the present moment of World War) that the future lay open, that the “after” was unknowable. The ambiguity of an open future, encountered by the reader in an after, would be charged with the authors’ emotions of elation at the possibility of progressive change as well as with their melancholy at the possibility of their texts retrospectively reading as one more addition to a heap of wreckage documenting “barbarism” (“Theses” 256).

In holding open this ambiguity, Woolf and Benjamin hold open “the continuum of history” for the reader (“Theses” 262). In crystallizing the “the raw & the lyrical” (Woolf D 5: 259) side by side in their works, Woolf and Benjamin make the reader’s agency in his or her own present moment all. These texts would be time-bombs. They are embedded with a “time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]” (“Theses” 261), a potential that the authors hope will be activated by a reader in the after. Drawn into these texts, the reader is made responsible for this potential, the hoped for future once again deferred by a repetition of past barbarisms.

The “visionary” aspect of the relationship that these texts invite with their future readers may lead some to ask whether such a relationship is not impossible for readers in postmodernity. Indeed, John Xiros Cooper, who argues that modernism bore within it the mechanism of a totalized market society, would likely claim that the flatness of late capitalism’s horizon has already defused the potential vision I see embedded in these
texts. My counterargument lies in the fact of the number of readers drawn to these texts. As the consumerist loop increasingly sublates every aspect of our lives (a process abetted more by postmodernist than modernist art, if we are to ascribe responsibility to the arts as Cooper’s work does), the desire for an alternative vantage, one that blasts outside of that flat horizon, increases. Consequently, resisting readers increasingly turn to and are hailed by the participatory vision of these texts: Benjamin’s unique standpoint of historical materialism, Woolf’s insistence on individual agency in seeing the world as a collective and dynamic work of art, and H.D.’s alternative of a gift economy. The very dehumanization that an all pervasive market economy engenders provokes, even at this late day, the desire for its opposite. Indeed, we turn to these texts because we recognize that struggle is confronted in them. Consequently, we have reached, and continue to reach, a “now of recognizability,” when the “now” of these texts matters intensely for many in the crises of our “now” as “the status quo threatens to be preserved” (N10,2: 474).

I do not mean that readers turn to these texts to escape the ruined present into a pre-fall world; such a nostalgic ideal can hardly be sustained by these texts. However, for many, these texts provide a site for seeing the possibilities of the future differently. In the parallactic vision of the “now” of these texts and the reader’s now, a vision that does not flinch from examining the forces and choices that have culminated in the catastrophe of those two coordinates, the future is nonetheless still open. Moreover, the texts’ hailing

12 That Cooper manages to sublate Benjamin’s work into his own deterministic, retrospective vision (whereas Benjamin’s project pushes hardest against the historicist’s deterministic view of history) underscores the fact that these are indeed essentially open texts that do not hail one kind of reader.
of the reader’s agency—we are made to feel the desired and looked for other—positions
the reader in a kind of messianic role. The dialectical vision of these texts holds
negativity and redemption in tension. This is the messianic impulse that, in believing in a
future audience and sustaining hope in late modernism against the heaping evidence of a
catastrophe of the status quo, fringes these pages with a tragic joy.

Benjamin’s messianic impulse was not revolutionary physical violence, but
influenced by Kafka’s “negative theology,” Lukác’s “messianic Marxism,” and
Scholem’s “esoteric Zionism” (Rabinbach xv). Benjamin, characteristically, took from
each the elements most amenable to his philosophy while remaining an outsider to
orthodox Marxism and Zionism and countering Kafka’s negativity with his own strange
hope. Indeed, the kind of messianic impulse cultivated in Benjamin’s works, which I
find in Woolf’s and H.D.’s as well, can account for their oscillation between “utter
pessimism and contemplative withdrawal” and their resolute hopefulness (Rabinbach xv).
The material realities of the war intensified the messianic impulse in these works. H.D.
and Woolf create images of the writer herself at work—creating a space for an ecstatic
vision of the world—as a way of writing against war. Benjamin’s self-reflexivity is more
methodological and less figural in the “Theses” and the Arcades Project (how does the
historical materialist orient himself in time? how is Baudelaire a precursor?), but he does
figure his perceiving self for us in “A Berlin Chronicle.” Also like Woolf and H.D., he
attests to the realities paradoxically spurring a period of productive work. On September
30, 1938, he writes to Scholem that he has just finished “my long essay ‘Baudelaire and
the Paris of the Second Empire’” after “three months of terribly concentrated labor. It
represents the second part of a voluminous book on Baudelaire. The combination of this
most intensive of labors and the political events forced me to reach down into the very bottom of my resources” (231). Plumbing these depths, Benjamin affirms the course he has steered for the previous two decades, evolving a historical materialist criticism that parallels the modernist development of lyric narrative and steering between hopeless nihilism and Scholem’s Zionist messianism.

The messianic impulse in Benjamin’s work is in many ways Scholem’s, but it is secularized.13 The “messianic cessation of happening” in Benjamin’s dialectical image, or constellation, is an engineered moment of standstill for a future reader, who in entering the composed ruins of the *Arcades* enters into the moment of transition that the author holds open through the text’s form—its dual perspective and its incompleteness (“Theses” 263).14 In offering the perspective of the angel of history, caught in historical time but longing for timeless time, Benjamin offers the reader the opportunity to reject the determinist lens of historicist progress for the simultaneity of the present when backed by the deep past, visible in the “messianic cessation of happening.”

For Benjamin, “now,” the present moment, is “a model of Messianic time,” as it “comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement” (263). The historian who would seize a concept of history in this way is made to stand between two

---

13 In Scholem’s formulation in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, messianism is grounded in the negativity of the existing order (the “catastrophic and destructive nature” of the “transition”) and yet turns its face toward “the utopianism of the content of realized Messianism” (7). In this optimism, one’s “hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin free at last and undisguised” (Scholem 10).

14 As the “Translators’ Foreword” of the published *Arcades Project* notes, whether “the text we have before us” realizes Benjamin’s conception of the project is undecidable (x). Whereas it has “become customary to regard the text […] as at best a ‘torso,’ a monumental fragment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook” (x), the fact that Benjamin revises many of the “Convolutes” and its continuity with Benjamin’s earlier uses of “the montage form” suggest that a massive ruin might be near to Benjamin’s intentions (x-xi).
worlds, as is the reader of lyric narrative, viewing on the one hand the vertiginous perspective of mankind’s life on earth (“the paltry fifty millennia of homo sapiens” in contrast to “the history of organic life on earth,” as Benjamin’s modern biologist explains) and on the other hand the “now” of daily life composed of the monumental and most ephemeral in the experience of the self (“Theses” 263). The present then is not limited to a surface “now”; rather, “the ‘time of the now’ [...] is shot through with chips of Messianic time,” is not “homogenous or empty,” but compacted of explosive potential, if one would only lay hands upon it (263-64).

In Benjamin’s *Arcades* and “Theses,” it isn’t the author who holds the power of redemption, but the reader. That is, the active reader is the looked for messianic element. In his seventh thesis, Benjamin describes the orientation that the historical materialist (as opposed to the historicist) has toward the past—an orientation most like the melancholic artist who attempts to capture the something that forever escapes. The historian writing history looks upon the past with a sadness rooted in a “process of empathy,” an “acedia, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” (245). However, whereas the historicist empathizes with “the victor,” Benjamin’s historical materialist (the ideal reader/writer of history Benjamin both posits and hails) will look upon “the triumphal procession” with “cautious detachment” (256). Recognizing that the “document of civilization” is “at the same time a document of barbarism” and the historicist’s act of transmitting that document is complicit in that legacy of barbarism, the historical materialist must counter his or her impulse to empathize with the victor (with past civilizations’ “great minds and talents” and “anonymous […] contemporaries”) with a cold look at its concurrent barbarity (256). In
order to break from the existing order, in which “the ‘state of emergency’ […] is the rule,” Benjamin claims that we must “attain to a conception of history” that sees this rule as the status quo and can thus take up the task of bringing “about a real state of emergency” (257). The latter will enable us to see that fascism should not be treated a priori “as a historical norm,” should not be read in the context of the progress of civilization (257). Benjamin then states why a sense of “amazement” at the crisis they are experiencing is not sufficient: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable” (257).

We have found ourselves repeating the question—“how is this [genocide, war, indifference] still possible?”—throughout the later-twentieth century and into the twenty-first so often that it has nearly become, at least for the victors, a rhetorical question and a cliché. Yet, there are writers of history today and in past decades who have taken up the methodology Benjamin describes. Is it that attaining such a concept of history is not enough to derail the recurrent amazement of our recurrent barbarisms? Certainly. Likewise, “the way to end war” cannot end war if the formula is printed in a small pamphlet or heavy tome that languishes in a few university libraries, assorted attic boxes, and landfills. That is why Benjamin’s redemption, the necessary element of his messianism, lies in readers, and more specifically, active readers who interpret, decipher,
transmit, translate, and make use of the ruins Benjamin has composed. Benjamin’s text that transforms the experience of his epoch into “ruins.” That is, in looking to the future of the reader’s present “now,” Benjamin looks upon his own epoch as ruins, as both a crisis in the now and as a “now” eclipsed. His task, then, looking to the ruins of the epoch of the nineteenth century, is to compose the ruins of his own epoch, preparing for the redemptive vision of readers in an after. Benjamin’s charge as a historical materialist who would pass on this concept of history is to show the limits of historicism’s universal and “eternal’ image of the past” and the potential of historical materialism’s method of “suppl[y]ing] a unique experience with the past” (“Theses” 262). Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* itself supplies us today with a unique experience of not only the nineteenth century but of late modernism and the Second World War as well, an experience that will be unique for each reader in his or her particular “now.” As it is “based on a constructive principle,” rather than merely an additive principle, Benjamin’s materialistic historiography is grounded in fact and foregrounds the imaginative agency

15 That is why the place of higher education in society is also key. As the running-room for thought is increasingly cut short by the infiltration of “market forces” into universities and colleges, the possibility for cultivating this vision is increasingly foreclosed.

16 Stanley Cavell, reviewing the *Arcades* and also using the metaphor of “remains,” comments on the centrality of Benjamin’s montage method to the project’s “endlessness”: “My emphatic perception at the moment is of this text as work, as production without a product (a way to think about its claim to philosophy, or rather, to philosophizing)” (32).
of the reader/writer experiencing history (“Theses” 262). Benjamin looks forward to the reader/writer who takes up “this method” of “blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework” which thus both “preserve[s]” and simultaneously “cancel[s]” the “lifework” (263). In blasting Benjamin’s work out of the continuum of history (say, by reading it in the context a French director, American poet, and British novelist, or in the many ways Benjamin’s thought has branched across disciplines and into our culture), a reader/writer takes up Benjamin’s method and thereby his “self” is “canceled” yet revivified—is both timeless and in our time.

We thus turn from “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,” to grasping “a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (“Theses” 263). Our unique experience of an historical “now” as coincident with our own “now” empowers not only our interventions into unfolding history, but also vitalizes Benjamin’s lifework. As active participants, we enter Benjamin’s ruins—the fragments of the Arcades and “Theses”—as well as the structures others have composed from those ruins—the dissertations, critical studies, art instillations, web-sites, manifestoes, reading groups, political theories, and memorials. The latter can be literally entered into by those who make a pilgrimage to Portbou, where Benjamin had attempted to cross from France into Spain (carrying that elusive black briefcase) and, seemingly unable to evade the “little hunchback,” took his life (Fittko 954). The monument at Portbou, Dani Karavan’s memorial “Passages,” attests to the success of Benjamin’s intentions—the actualization of his concept of history in an ever growing and diverse community of voices that respond to his work. Momme Brodersen describes the commemoration in his biography of Benjamin:
Stepping into Dani Karavan’s work, we, with gentle irony, may imagine ourselves stepping into our messianic roles, passing through what Benjamin described in the last line of his “Theses” as the very “second of time [which may be] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (264).

That the reader should be the messianic element of the text may be particularly frustrating, even to sympathetic readers, because of our desire to marshal the meaning of the text through our own particular strait gate to a determined end. However, it is the variability of interpretation, the productive tension of readers “thinking differently” but nonetheless thinking together (Woolf, BTA 200) that these authors value. Marshalling meaning toward an interpretive or narrative closure would be to collude in a status quo whose narrow channels of totalitarianism terminated in the same catastrophic heap Benjamin asked us to finally awaken to. The ambiguity these authors wrote into these montage texts intended an openness that would preserve an interval for engaged and creative thinking. Karavan’s monument looks not unlike Woolf’s narrow bridge of art; it is essentially unfinished.

And here I have reached the “finger post,” the question Woolf raises about her vision in “A Sketch of the Past” (133). The passage from Walter Pater’s Renaissance that Woolf’s passage remembered to me is a statement that captures the intensity of these Second World War works, that is, the haunting presence of thanatos that was the ground
figuring the creative *eros* of their vision. Writing in his “Conclusion” that we are all “*condamnes*,” Pater quietly notes, “we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more” (153). Given this awareness of the briefness of life, an awareness Woolf and H.D. particularly attempt to convey to the readers who read in an “after” where the rupture of death is veiled by commercial distraction, to Pater “our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (153).

Was this a valid connection? Could Pater, whose claims have been read as patently escapist, really appeal to these writers, engaged equally with politics and aesthetics, at that moment? Returning to Pater’s “Conclusion,” rediscovering the humanist element of Pater’s claims, I found the connection affirmed.\(^{17}\) Art for art’s sake is not about the “work of art” out there, but rather, about the work that art offers us in here when it functions outside of a consumerist loop of commodity production and consumption. If our goal lies in the work of “expanding that interval,” enriching our experience of life, then in considering the activities we turn to toward this end, we must:

\[
\text{be sure it is passion—} \text{that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake. (Pater 153)}
\]

The frank proposal of art is an embrace. For the individual who responds to that proposal, the poetic impulse engenders a new vision of the prosaic moments of his or her life’s narrative; it is only how art changes one’s experience of life as it passes that is valuable. But isn’t this an egotistic turning away from any communal much less global

---

\(^{17}\) Woolf also writes in her diary of turning to read “Pascal & Pater” as a resistant response to the grim thoughts of death that conflict engenders (*D* 5: 226).
vision? Pater acknowledges the narrow confines of the individual mind, yet would have us expend our energy in pushing past those barriers, as vain as the effort may be. The opportunities for expanding the interval of one’s life become quite narrow when one retreats from the world, since such a retreat enables the rise of dehumanizing forces—particularly amoral capitalism and war—where art’s proposition, if it survives, becomes a frank invitation to a zero sum commerce in which your self and your moments become market commodities rather than the creative and fertilizing commerce of eros.

The opportunity, the work, that Woolf’s lyric narrative texts frankly offer us is a particularly desirable gift today. In teaching these texts, in asking students to wrestle with Benjamin’s angel of history, H.D.’s “Tribute to the Angels,” or Woolf’s angel in the house, I hope to give my students an opportunity they might not otherwise have in a postmodern experience. Growing up within the flat horizon of late capitalism, these texts enable us to see from a different vantage point, to discover the interval necessary for imagining a different way of being in the world. The vantage that we reach in engaging with the audience who joins into the unfolding fugue of creation in Between the Acts is the dialectic glimpsed in the intervals of Fanny’s creative engagement with her piano teacher in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” In the moment of the music, that is, “with [our] ears full of music,” one both lives (immersed in the lyric) and sees the pattern of a life (aware of the narrative beginning and ending) (“Slater’s” 103). The power of these texts lies in the third level of montage, our engagement. The difference we mark in taking up these unfinished texts, as one would take up Bach’s Art of Fugue, lies in the tension between the notes or words on a page and our continuous performance. In our production of the text, we attain the lyric narrative suspension, living in the moment and
simultaneously seeing the moment in the lifework, and from this vantage may see our moment in life as an interval in a work of art that we can never know in its totality but glimpse only intermittently. The standpoint of lyric narrative, of timeless time, encourages our critical illumination of history, of the stakes of the present moment, and of the possibility of creating a different future. As teachers and students, as artists, as participants in various discourses, as thinkers who think differently, we hold open the possibility of realizing the gift of peace in the work’s vision, the interval in which creative work “syllabling discordantly life, life, life, without measure” (BTA 209) dissolves the barriers of the moment in our consummation with these authors’ vision.

In What I Believe, a Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlet published in 1939, E.M. Forster elaborates a humanist vision which, acknowledging the existence of “Force” and the limits of “Democracy,” sees the potential of society in its creative force.

I realize that all society rests upon force. But all the great creative actions, all the decent human relations, occur during the intervals when force has not managed to come to the front. These intervals are what matter. I want them to be as frequent and as lengthy as possible, and I call them ‘civilization.’ (11; emphasis added)

While Forster does not presume that man naturally progresses, the historicist’s deterministic view, neither will he presume “we cannot improve”; war poses the most obvious obstacle to progress since such improvement is to be found in the “intervals” (14). Forster’s vision suggests Woolf’s own:

What is good in people—and consequently in the world—is their insistence on creation, their belief in friendship and loyalty for their own sakes; and though Violence remains and is, indeed, the major partner in this muddled establishment, I believe that creativeness remains too, and will always assume direction when violence sleeps. (14)
In the last chapter of *The Gift*, Bryher, seeming to continue outloud H.D.’s thoughts of the intolerability of the repetition of the war, recalls an experience of renewed air raids similar to what H.D. is experiencing, words that provoke H.D. to project her words onto a larger backdrop:

I felt like you, in Cornwall last summer [...] I had my first raid after the interval, last summer. It was worse, I felt than anything that had happened here. It was because it was my first raid after the interval.

After the interval?
Would these memories go with us? (216)

The trepidation expressed in H.D.’s questions, questions that can only be answered by readers in an after, is the unease H.D. and Woolf convey in their attempts to preserve a vision of the importance of the interval in working toward a different kind of civilization. Would these memories, would this vision, go with us when our place knows us no more? Or, would they remain in the memory of another generation who joins the score? In the memoir-like writing of Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” and H.D.’s *The Gift*, we hear the echo of the oldest of lyric impulses surfacing—“remember me.” While I would not want to deny Woolf and H.D. the most human of impulses, I do want to mark a change in that lyric refrain, for it is not so much the “me” that the emphasis falls on, but the “we” in these lyric narratives. We are to remember not an “I” that created an alternative world (as the heartbreaking final lyric note of *Finnegans Wake* intimates), but rather a way of seeing the world, a vision of “us.” In our re-membering of these texts, the absent-present authors ask us to remember the shattered wall, but to remember as well the vision of peace and beauty, all the potential unrealized in the interval before us and all the beauty realized in the past reechoed in the present.
The work of art becomes not only the site for preserving this vision, but also the means of connecting with it. In the “rapture” of transmuting the “shock” of experience, as Woolf describes the creative process of connection itself in “A Sketch of the Past,” we reach Woolf’s “philosophy” (72). What I have called Woolf’s vision, or “at any rate” her “constant idea”:

that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (72)

Like Pater, Forster, and H.D., Woolf’s vision jolts us doubly. Without God, without the art work out there in its inviolable totality, then, on the one hand, we *are* the immensely desirable and beautiful work of art, and, on the other, that work is our responsibility.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


--. “One-Way Street.” Reflections 61-94.

--. “On the Mimetic Faculty.” Reflections 333-36.


--. “Surrealism.” Reflections 177-92.

--. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Illuminations 253-64.

--. “Unpacking My Library” Illuminations 59-67.

--. “What is Epic Theater?” Illuminations 147-54.


--. “‘I had two loves separate’: The Sexualities of H.D.’s *HER*.” Friedman and DuPlessis. 205-232.


Gualtieri, Elena. “*Three Guineas* and the Photograph.” Joannou. 165-78.


Kloepfer, Deborah Kelly. “Fishing the Murex Up: Sense and Resonance in H.D.’s *Palimpsest*” Friedman and DuPlessis. 185-204.


Peach, Linden. “No Longer a View: Virginia Woolf in the 1930s and the 1930s in Virginia Woolf.” Joannou 192-204.


Richardson, Brian. “Beyond the Poetics of Plot: Alternative Forms of Narrative Progression and the Multiple Trajectories of *Ulysses*.” Phelan and Rabinowitz 167-80.


592


Thompson, Kristin. “The Rise and Fall of Film Europe.” Higson and Maltby. 52-81.


Westman, Karin E. “History as Drama: Towards a Materialist Historiography.” Gillespie and Hankins 335-43.


