Das ewig Weibliche: Temporality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

In Book 11 of *The Confessions*, St. Augustine asks a simple, yet profound question: "What then is time?" (135). He admits truthfully, "If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not" (135). Augustine's answer hints at an inherent problem with explaining such an abstract concept. Although a temporal event can be known, to explicate temporality – something simultaneously chaotic, arrayed, systematic, and symbolic – is intrinsically impossible. Of course, this does not mean it is indemonstrable or inexpressible. Rather, it means that the abstraction of time can only be understood through the medium of metaphor. In the oft-quoted lines of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," the narrator proclaims:

> But at my back I always here
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity. (21-4)

In these lines, Marvel represents the subjective experience of lived time by figuring its passage primarily in spatial terms of speed and endless distance. From a scientific perspective, Marvell's choice of metaphor is as accurate as it is apt. However, time transformed into space escapes direct representation in the poem. Its passage is transformed and transferred into a chariot traveling across an unending desert. It is symbolized, but not described nor demonstrated.

While Western philosophers continually seek for a way to define a universal and progressive temporality in line with the Enlightenment thought, authors have used a host of unique and distinctly different devices to convey the experience of lived time to readers. For instance, *The Odyssey* begins in media res and contains flashbacks, foreshadowing, and the description of events occurring concurrently in the Mediterranean. These narrative devices bridge the gap between textual time, the time represented by the words in the narrative, and

readerly time, the time perceived by the reader during their reading. Illustrating a duration of time in literature ultimately adds an additional layer of complexity above providing a unified definition because it requires writers to demonstrate its passage and describe its effects in a comprehensible way to the reader. So, in addition to delineating time entirely in figurative terms, when it is referenced at all beyond mere statement within most works of fiction, time must also be communicated to readers through a variety of narrative devices. Otherwise, Odysseus would remain ageless despite spending 20 years at sea.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of World War I, writers set a new challenge for themselves and began to focus inward—on the accurate representation of the subjective experiences of the individual—and it became the penultimate focus of those who we now define as Modernist writers. They began to seek out new methods of representing the interior of a character's mind and its distinct timescape. Authors such as Woolf, Joyce, and Richardson principally relied on stream-of-consciousness to express this new temporality. However, as a narrative device, it has limits. It cannot adequately illustrate the individuated time of multiple characters simultaneously for any significant duration of time. It is better suited for single moments, places, or individuals because it inherently extends readerly time by extending seconds of thought into chapters. So, what I would like to present today is an examination of how Virginia Woolf sought to overcome this limitation in her final novel, *Between the Acts*. By exploring Woolf's technical choices when attempting to render the diversity of human-experienced time in the novel, I hope to demonstrate how the unique cinematographic organization of *Between the Acts* allows Woolf to present a more coherent representation of lived time to the reader.

In her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf describes daily life as "a kind of nondescript cotton wool," which is her "private shorthand" for the muffled "moments of non-being" that comprise the majority of day-to-day life (70). She argues that embedded within

the strands of non-being exist special, separate "moments of being," which constitute and define a truly lived life (70). Woolf describes these "moments of being" as memories or events that contain the rapturous feeling of being "passive under some sledgehammer blow" when one is "exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning" (78). Her conception of these moments bears more than a passing resemblance to Joycean epiphanies.

Regardless, Woolf believes a "real novelist" must "convey both sorts of being" in order to fully reveal the "pattern hid behind the cotton wool" (72). For her, everyday occurrences are interconnected and interlaced with events of greater importance on a continuous, but barely perceptible level (72). Recording a "moment of being" and putting it into words renders life more comprehensible since each one illustrates "a token of some real thing behind appearances" (73). However, they can only function in reference to "moments of non-being" because the contrast reveals their existence and full meaning. Woolf's focus on these individual moments as representational of lived life leads critics like Shiv Kumar to write "of all the stream-of-consciousness novelists, Virginia Woolf alone seems to present a consistent and comprehensive treatment of time" since time is her "mode of perception" (64). Woolf views everything through the lens of time.

Expanding on this assertion, Mary Ann Gillies sees Woolf's perception of temporal moments as instances of pure duration in the Bergsonian sense (109). As Henri Bergson posits it in *Time and Free Will*, pure duration is "the form which succession of our conscious states assumes […] when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states [and] forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole" (100). In describing duration as an autotelic heterocosm, Bergson defines time as a quality, as an internal standard of measurement, rather than an external numerical quantity (76). The duration of perceived moments in lived time appears mutable in spite of the consistency asserted by external, and necessarily mechanical,

standards because it depends on an internalized chronological continuum an individual maintains in order to operate effectively.

Since Woolf's major concern is to catch only the invisible, inner "moments of being" in words regardless of external ascription, Mary Ann Gilles argues that Woolf's novels (re)presents pure duration to the reader as it originally occurred to the artist herself. Unfortunately, duration cannot be purely conveyed because all attempts to express the abstract fluctuation of temporality necessitates the spatialization of time, which results in time's inevitable escape from representation into metaphor. Even Bergson himself makes frequent use of figurative images and metaphors in his own philosophical attempt to define time. When he insists duration operates as essentially a qualitative multiplicity, which is heterogeneous and temporal, he can only conveys his conception as "the unrolling of a spool" or "a spectrum of a thousand shades" (*The Creative Mind* 137-8). Like other authors, Woolf must construct and maintain and external, and necessarily spatialized temporality in order to successfully express duration to the readers.

Of course, Virginia Woolf is extraordinarily adept at spatially delineating the passage of time. In the short and vividly descriptive section in *To the Lighthouse* entitled "Time Passes," she constructs a sequence of ten years passing from the fixed point of the Ramsay's summer house, which is utterly devoid of human life. Through repetitive description of how "night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference" and likening time to an almost cathartic deluge, Woolf renders the experience and passage of lived time (202). Nonetheless, Woolf seeks to capture individually experienced temporal life through sustained focus on, and conveyance of, time-filled "moments of being" without resorting to spatial representation of those moments. So, she segregates the moments from the passage of time, renders them timeless, and conveys the reader between them as quickly and succinctly as possible in "Time Passes." While successful to an extent, she does

not truly succeed in overcoming the limitations of stream-of-consciousness. *To the Lighthouse* is little more than two single moments delicately connected.

This is why she experiments with a shattered and fragmented narrative in *Between the Acts*. Woolf shifts the narrative focus from a particular individual in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* to the universally particular individuality of the English people by centering the subject of *Between the Acts* on an interpolated village pageant-play. Originating with Louis Napoleon Parker's Sherbourne Pageant in 1905, pageant-plays employ "rote patriotism, recycled literary materials, and often clumsy theatrical amateurism" in order to "replace [historical] representation […] with literal re-enactment" (Esty 246-8). Although the narrative in *Between the Acts* surrounds a theatrical performance set at "half-past three on a June day in 1939," the novel is not strictly a (re)presentation of the spectacle of the pageant-play (52). Rather, Woolf appropriates the composite, the collage, and the linear montage of the pageant-play as the framework around which she erects her secondary, external narrative.

The ultimate result of employing this pageant-in-novel and novel-as-pageant design is a constellation of images, voices, and interactions presented cinematographically. To borrow Walter Benjamin's performative definition from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: "the artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera," which is detached and selective in function full of selective cuts and rapid transitions in focus (228). The novels uniquely discontinuous structure denies what Benjamin refers to as "aura"—or the authentic authority that typically emanates from the personified presence of the actor as character before the spectator—and thus calls attention to the constructedness of the performance itself by denying reader identification with the character (219). Since the only perspective position allowed in *Between the Acts* is the constantly fluctuating camera-like eye of the reader, Woolf

coerces "the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actors" (Benjamin 228). By inducing the narrative to function cinematographically, Woolf "need not respect the performance as an integral whole" (Benjamin 228). Instead, she can direct the reader's focus toward "the sequence of positional views" she supplies—her heterogeneous and temporal "moments of being"—while still providing the moments of non-being that give lived time its meaning.

However, accentuating the constructedness of the performance within the novel and controlling the reader's gaze so minutely also stresses the representational role of the characters. Consequently, the characters within *Between the Acts* feel flat and appear to serve a performative rather than plot driven function. As the character Isa self-consciously remarks, the plot becomes perfunctory and "only there to beget emotion" and provide organization (Woolf 63). Karen Jacob explains how this marginalization of plot highlights "the allegorical dimensions of the text" and often causes critics "to translate the main characters, with varying degrees of persuasiveness, into their presumed 'authentic' identities as historical or mythic figures" (222). This allegorical (re)interpretation is not unexpected considering how Paul de Man defines allegory as a sign to sign relation. Within "The Rhetoric of Temporality," he posits that "the allegorical sign refers to another sign that precedes it," and therefore "meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* […] of a previous sign with which it can never coincide" (207). Due to the reduction of plot driven characterization, allegory spreads out first vertically along the temporal axis of the historical narrative (re)presented through the pageant-play and then horizontally along the temporal axis of the novel's overarching narrative.

History, with its foundation in temporality, can only be spoken of indirectly through performative figures for time that enact words that are deeds. Without other means of conveyance, the movement of human bodies through the staged space in a pageant-play becomes

the primary vehicle of temporal expression. In *Between the Acts*, the Pointz Hall pageant-play begins with "a small girl, like a rosebud in pink," announcing "*England am I…*" only to be replaced moments later with the teenage "Hilda, the carpenter's daughter," proclaiming "*O, England's grown a girl now*" (53, 55). The next representation is the "Queen Elizabeth – Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco" (57). Each in turn personifies England and lived time passing, but only by operating along fundamentally allegorical lines. The characters of the pageant-play never serve as characters, but as acting representations or characterizations of the abstraction that is England. The Chorus of villagers that move on and off stage throughout the performance function similarly as they sing "single file in and out between the trees; *for the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring*" (86). While the Chorus sings of pastoral repetition, it is the repetition of their singing and their movements themselves that actually indicate continual and irreversible temporal movement for the audience.

Likewise, the performative actions of characters existing *between* the acts of the pageant-play in the novel figure as allegorical expressions of lived time. Characters such Lucy, Bart, Isa, and Giles do not stand in-person before the reader any more than England or Queen Elizabeth do. They are all personifications of abstractions. Their very presentation in words, as well as the cinematographic cross-cutting of the novel, separates them from the reader by a literal fourth wall. The elder Lucy and Bart represent dissenting conceptions of Englishness "for she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists" (Woolf 81). Isa is allegorized as "the age of the century" or the "spirit of the age" and Giles is the "sulky hero" and "so on *ad infinitum*" (14, 74, 17). Miss La Trobe's concluding scene of the pageant-play highlights the performative function of all the characters within and outside the pageant-play by turning the reader's attention outward with the appropriately titled "The Present Time. Ourselves" (121). The reaction of the pageant-play's audience is a reverberation of confusion: "Ourselves […] But what could she know about

ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939 – it was ridiculous" (121). While the audience within the novel believes it is "impossible" to represent themselves, the reader of *Between the Acts* already knows that they already are a collection of allegorical representations of 1930s England. As Debord remarks, "the pseudo-events which rush by in spectacular dramatizations have not been lived by those informed of them; moreover they are lost in the inflation of their hurried replacement at every throb of the specular machinery" (157). Just as the characters are unable to realize their function and position within the novel, we the readers of the novel are unable to realize our own despite being aware of our present moment and the passage of time.

In seeking to express the innumerable diversity of human experienced time, Woolf can only present an uncertain performance of time. In her effort to negate the figuratively and spatially arrayed temporality conveyed by traditional narrative chronology, she subsequently heightened the allegorical significance of the characters in *Between the Acts* in order to maintain a (re)presentation of time-filled moments. Although the familiar stream-of-consciousness technique of her prior novels, which relies on metaphor and personification to figure the passage of lived time, still operates in *Between the Acts*, by organizing the story cinematographically Woolf places greater emphasis on the "moments of being" that constitute real lived life by selectively cutting between them. By detaching the reader's perspective through the discontinuous nature of cinematographic presentation, she sacrifices the individuation of the characters and thus the authority provided by their authenticity. All become preformative figures for time, and all allow time to still escape full representation through allegoric transformation. As a result, Woolf does not truly succeed in articulating the passage of time, none of Woolf's prior works more wholly express duration to the reader than *Between the Acts*.

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