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# Evoking Unity: Toward a Communal Phenomenology in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Phillip Douglas Bandy entitled "Evoking Unity: Toward a Communal Phenomenology in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Thomas F. Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Urmila Seshagiri, Allen Dunn

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Evoking Unity:  
Toward a Communal Phenomenology  
in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Phillip Douglas Bandy  
May 2012

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## Abstract

Contemporary readings of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf typically situate these canonical authors within their historical contexts as exponents of the material conditions of modernity or as the literary precursors of postmodernism, as writers of indeterminacy and linguistic play. In this thesis, I argue for a mode of reading Woolf and Faulkner grounded not in history or language, but in consciousness as the irreducible basis of human experience. That is, by invoking the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, I claim that both authors attempted to engage more fully with not simply a historical moment called “modernity,” but a human reality characterized by flux and existential anguish by attempting to reconcile individual experiences of difficulty and despair through artistic creation. I contend that Woolf and Faulkner move beyond individual despair by evoking a communal phenomenology. Such an aesthetic springs forth from *experience* and assimilates the minutest details and desires of individual experiences into a powerful collective voice that refuses to erase individuality and arrests the motion of life so that the reader may, at least for a moment, witness humanity on both the minutest and grandest of scales. I begin by analyzing Faulkner’s desperate but ultimately failed attempt to fashion such an aesthetic in *The Sound and the Fury*. I then juxtapose his aesthetic, which I contend fails to convey a sense of intersubjective unity, with Woolf’s in *To the Lighthouse*, which acknowledges a human existence characterized by isolation and chaotic flux, but offers art, through Lily Briscoe’s Künstlerroman and a dialogic narrative consciousness, as a mode of evoking communion. I contend that such an aesthetic as Woolf’s presents a vision of art and the world in which humanity need not despair at the condition of its own existence nor throw caution to the wind and embrace such amorphous concepts as “play.” In sum, I contend that such a reading of modernism is necessary because a communal phenomenology acknowledges that experience occurs on both an individual and collective scale.

For my mother, who has always pressed me to do what I *love*.

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## Introduction

In the 1988 introduction to *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman writes, “I tried to open up a perspective that will reveal all sorts of cultural and political movements as part of one process: modern men and women asserting their dignity in the present—even a wretched and oppressive present—and their right to control their future; striving to make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home” (11). I hope to work within this understanding of modernity—an often “wretched” and “oppressive” experience with which the modern individual must cope—and expand its framework to understand better the complex aesthetic moves made by two canonical modernist authors: Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Berman’s guiding principles are Marxist and his aims expressly political and provocative; mine, on the other hand, will be primarily aesthetic and philosophical, though my reading of modernist texts does enable collectivist political readings. By looking at the philosophical context in which both authors were writing and analyzing their two major works, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Sound and the Fury*, I hope to construct an understanding of certain key features of their aesthetics—primarily fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and formal unity—that present an ontology critical of the Victorian realist position by attempting to understand and convey the plurality of experiences of the world. Furthermore, by proposing a clearer understanding of what constitutes reality, I hope to defend Woolf and Faulkner against the accusation of modernist solipsism. That is, I will argue that by shifting the focus of narration to the minds of individual characters—whose consciousnesses form the irreducible basis for human experience—Woolf and Faulkner do not lose touch with reality, but rather attempt to engage it more fully.

Berman makes clear in his definition of “modernity” that it is primarily an *experience*: “There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today” (15). The notion that modernity is a shared experience will play a key role in my analysis of Woolf and Faulkner. That is, since consciousness is always consciousness of something, the events which take place in the novels—the Compson family’s steady disintegration and the absence of Caddy; the daily lives of those at the Ramsay family’s home on the Isle of Skye, the inexorable progression of time and the violent incursion of history—constitute the life world of each character’s experience. However, as becomes immediately apparent, Benjy’s experience of the world is much different from Quentin’s, Lily Briscoe’s alienated from Charles Tansley’s. Berman notes the shared nature of modernity: “Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” (15). The modern world of Faulkner and Woolf is uncertain and threatening, yet, because of the sheer facticity of our being, something that must be engaged and dealt with. Berman shares with many philosophers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the notion that to be modern is to perpetually remake oneself and to continue to become new. This in itself threatens the autonomy of the individual and makes for an angst-filled experience. However, it is when the individual shuts itself off from the world and seeks stasis as opposed to accepting flux that living in the world becomes intolerable. For someone like

Quentin Compson, who clings desperately to a hopelessly antiquated system of Southern gentility and chivalry, “all that is solid melts into air” and can never be retrieved and made sense of again. But when juxtaposed with other fragments, as Faulkner does so masterfully in *The Sound and the Fury*, we can begin to construct meaning by listening to the play of voices within the text. Unfortunately for Faulkner, the voices never coalesce—they are never able to speak in an understandable way to one another in order to find meaning.

Susan Stanford Friedman also uses images of vitality in the face of chaos to describe the modernists’ impetus to create: “The lifeblood of modernity’s chaos is its order. The impulse to order is the product of chaos” (510). We will see in Woolf and Faulkner an insatiable desire to create; indeed, Faulkner and Woolf exhibit the vital necessity of artistic production as a means of being in the world. Friedman, like Berman, also understands modernity as a “global landscape of encounter.” She calls on modernist studies “for modes of comparison that work with the contradictions inherent in comparison, that expand the voices put in play, that creatively open up dialogue and new frameworks for reading and acting in the world” (*Why not Compare?* 760). Reading both Faulkner and Woolf as authors interested in dialogue, whether directly through character interaction or indirectly through the juxtaposition of disparate conscious experiences, I argue that both authors attempt to portray the individual’s phenomenal experience of modernity, which more often than not is traumatic and isolated, but offer reconciliation and amelioration through creativity, commiseration, and dialogical understanding. This all occurs, as Friedman suggests, on a shared landscape of encounter. That is, the world is

that place in which individuals come together to encounter one another, to exchange desires and seek communion.

Comparative analysis of Woolf's and Faulkner's fiction has a long critical history, beginning perhaps most famously with Toni Morrison's 1955 Master's thesis "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's treatment of the alienated." Morrison, writing in the wake of High Modernism, notes that it "can be inferred from contemporary literature that a great part of the uniqueness of our time has its roots in the widespread concept of man as a thing apart—as an individual who, if not lost, is impressively alone" (1). For Morrison the defining feature of Woolf's and Faulkner's modernity is the crisis of alienation and the individual's attempt to find a place at home in the world. She concludes by noting both authors' attempts to reconcile this problem through art: "Both William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf are fully aware of the existing problem of isolation and their treatments show a serious effort to solve the problem" (39). Morrison, however, argues that Woolf and Faulkner go about treating isolation in a very different way. That is, she argues that Woolf embraces isolation as a point of abstraction from which one can gain self-awareness, while Faulkner embraces brotherhood and community. I argue, on the other hand, that both authors attempt to fashion an aesthetic resolution that embraces intersubjective unity. Isolation is the problem which an aesthetic that evokes a communal phenomenology can resolve. Thus, Woolf and Faulkner express an *individual* phenomenology of difficulty and despair and a *communal* phenomenology of unity. Furthermore, Woolf's and Faulkner's aesthetics, I contend, are *necessarily* inaccessible to superficial attempts at objective analysis in order to portray the anguish of the individual consciousness and the necessity of community. Indeed, their works attempt to unify these

disparate, anguished consciousnesses in order to fashion a meaningful representation of reality.

The key difference I hope to elucidate between these authors' aesthetics of community and unification is one of both degree and kind. Virginia Woolf, by creating a chameleon-like narrative consciousness which absorbs and synthesizes the characteristics of the novel's various characters and by mediating the subject-object binary through the artistic consciousness of Lily Briscoe, evokes a more unified communal phenomenology than does Faulkner. That is, *To the Lighthouse* never crystallizes into a fully unified atom of absolute meaning. It does, however, provide a textual example of the communal consciousness and its phenomenal rendering of a multiplicity of subjective desires. I will argue of *To the Lighthouse*, as Emily Hinnov does of Woolf's later work, that "Woolf's art opens up the possibility for illuminated moments of communal awareness based upon convergence in spite of difference" (1). Faulkner's representation of human consciousness, while dialogic, struggles to unify the vastly different consciousnesses of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, as well as the omniscient narrator of the Dilsey section, into a meaningful whole. By the end of the novel we are left with isolated characters and a narrative just as disjointed as that with which we began. Thus, for Faulkner any semblance of a communal phenomenology is located in the relationship between an authoritative authorial consciousness and the inferences made by a reader who by necessity must regularly fill in the gaps and make the connections left unmade by the narrator. It is here that I find a shortcoming in Faulkner's aesthetic. In attempting to fashion a fully subjective and openly dialogic representation of individual consciousnesses, Faulkner actually drives a wedge between his characters, and

subsequently the objective and subjective “worlds.” The reader is then forced to assemble piecemeal the phenomenal picture of this community of consciousnesses.

Both Faulkner critics and Woolf critics have devoted considerable pages to analyzing each author’s response to modernity. Faulkner has often been accused of a conservative suspicion of modernity, even a rejection of it in favor of a Symbolistic retreat into the self. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, describes Faulkner’s aesthetic manipulation of time as indicative of his “metaphysics of time,” which Sartre reads as chained to the past. Biographical readings of his work align Faulkner with the distraught Quentin Compson, who longs for the Old South that was crushed by the Civil War, continued to decay throughout Reconstruction, and was finally obliterated by the rapid modernization of the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> I will show, to the contrary, that Faulkner recognized the inexorable passage of time as that with which man must contend. That is, human endeavors will never halt the passage of time or heal the wounds of history. Faulkner rejects outright historicist approaches to art when he notes that the artist is “not really writing about his environment, he’s simply telling the story about human beings in terms of an environment...If he is merely telling a story to show a symptom of a sociological background then he is first a propagandist rather than a novelist.” Like Faulkner, my contention is that great modernist literature is not wholly the product of a particular time and place called “modernity.” That is, modernist literature is not a symptom of modernity. Rather, Woolf and Faulkner approach the world and its conditions as something inevitable, something in which mankind is always immersed and must, by nature of their Being, contend with. The communal phenomenology I aim to

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<sup>1</sup> See Blotner and Singal.

reveal, then, is not a necessary response to modernity, but a necessary response to existence because, as Faulkner says, “[the] novelist is talking about people, about man in conflict with himself, his fellows, or his environment” (*Lion in the Garden* 173).

The artistic and intellectual context in which Woolf was writing offers both aesthetic and philosophical insight to my project. She was reacting strongly against the outmoded conventions of Victorian art, which more often than not presented the world as something which is knowable in its entirety, and was in close proximity with numerous exponents of the literary and visual aesthetic movements that reacted against Victorian Realism: Bloomsbury and the Omega Workshop. The Omega Workshop is particularly useful as a point of analysis, as its socialist tendencies and effacement of the individual artist in favor of the collective vision of artistic production reflects an understanding of art as a production of the totality of experiences of a community. The Cambridge analytical philosophers—G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, particularly—offered the philosophical backdrop to Woolf’s aesthetic development. Moore and Russell worked to disprove idealism and replace it with an ethics and epistemology that regarded the nature of things in themselves as of primary importance.

Woolf, however, refused to relinquish the primacy of the individual’s subjective experience of the world. She famously claimed that “on or about December, 1910 human character changed” (*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* 194). This statement is problematic in that it suggests that either humanity underwent a fundamental change or that established artistic forms were an inadequate representation of human experiences of the world. I am not interested in pursuing the notion that human character underwent a drastic change in December of 1910. Indeed, I contend that Woolf and Faulkner share an understanding of

universal human nature in which individual desires for recognition and validation fuel the human pursuit of community and interpersonal relationships. I am interested, then, in the significance and validity of modernist claims to an aesthetic that gave a more complete picture of the human experience of modernity, one characterized by the constant struggle between individuals and uncontrollable forces such as History or Time, both of which always threaten to invalidate seemingly miniscule individual experiences of the world. For, as Berman suggests, modernity most certainly presented consciousness with an increasingly unmanageable reality which threatened the stability of the self by undermining the enlightened mind's capability of making sense of itself and the world.

Human nature, then, becomes the desire to make oneself known to the world and other individuals. Thus to purge the subjective from art would be to deny the vital importance of individual experience. As I will show, Faulkner's and Woolf's aesthetics are not a rejection of or desire to hide from modernity, but rather a vigorous, eager participation in it. Indeed, both authors recognize the impossibility of such a retreat. This participation is, for Woolf especially, more meaningful and tolerable in the proximity of others. An aesthetic which evokes a communal phenomenology attempts to capture and make sense of seemingly isolated experiences by unifying and melding the fragments to the closest approximation of unity, which, as we will see, is always limited by language's arbitrary and differential nature. As we will see in both author's comments about the artistic process, one of the few ways to make sense of the chaos of modern reality is to attempt to piece the fragments back together by creating.

Most central to these authors'—indeed most modernist authors'—troubling encounters with modernity is the well-documented schism between subject and object.

Henri Bergson's wildly popular *Time and Free Will* and *Creative Evolution* mark the philosophical point at which the barrier between self and other, subject and object began to dissolve. Previously undiscussed aspects of human reality became accessible and analyzable: subjective immediate experience was given primacy, the rational mind was barred from fully accessing truth or fashioning a whole understanding of reality. This stood in stark contrast to the realist principles of the Victorian era, which charged the writer with representing reality as it was—providing just the facts, all of which was founded on the Enlightenment belief that the human mind perceives and then, in a rational manner, makes sense of the reality outside of itself. Thus the omniscient narrators so prevalent in realist fiction know exactly what happened and how it happened. These, of course, are broad strokes that ignore many of the complexities of nineteenth-century and realist fiction; however, it is necessary to paint a brief picture of “subject and object and the nature of reality” in the Victorian era against which modernist fiction reacted so violently (*To the Lighthouse* 23).

Woolf and Faulkner were both immersed in the philosophical and aesthetic dispute between psychologism and empiricism. Sanford Schwartz situates the emergence of modernist literature during “...a major ‘inversion of Platonism’ in Western philosophy,” which, according to Schwartz, was based on a depth model of human experience which gives primacy to “the immediate flux of sensory appearances and not [to] the rational order beyond it” (12). Woolf and Faulkner both struggle to find an accurate representation of the thing itself without slipping too far into an uncritical reverence for the subjective image nor dismissing the validity and value of the individual's experience. A common criticism of many modernist authors is that they had

their heads buried in the subjective, ignoring everyday material reality. I hope to dispel such a characterization by a careful analysis of Woolf's ties to the analytical tradition and Faulkner's insistence on telling the story fully and truthfully, no matter how futile such an attempt might be.

Instead of attempting to portray the objective facts, a futile purpose according to the depth model of human experience, "Bergson... maintains that there is no reason to treat the personal element as an accidental addition to the original impression; the personal element is an integral part of the total experience... [I]n 'real duration' the consciousness of an object is suffused with the inner life of a particular individual" (Schwartz 25). I will take this Bergsonian emphasis on the importance of the inner life to the individual and enlarge its scope to suggest that Woolf and Faulkner want to construct a democratic picture of human experience that embraces every consciousness in their individuality and fallibility. I will also employ Bergson's notion of *élan vital*, the generative impulse that drives all life, particularly humanity, to change, progress, and create. While Bergson's *élan vital* is ultimately a cosmic claim rife with spiritual undertones, it offers a compelling parallel to the authorial tendencies of Woolf and Faulkner.

Faulkner described writing *The Sound and the Fury* as his "most splendid failure," an attempt to tell the same story four times—eventually five with the publication of the much debated appendix; each attempt, according to Faulkner, failed to encapsulate the entire truth. Faulkner gives us insight not only into a key moment in his development as a novelist—he realizes the impossibility of arriving at absolute Truth—but also insight into an aesthetic grounded on a very particular ontology, one quite similar to that to

which Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf arrive by the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse*. For these two modernists to purge the vital from the form would be both impossible and undesirable. For, if what is objective, meaningful, and real in human experience is always-already immersed in the subjective, then to purge that would be to render the work of art meaningless as a representation of human experience. Indeed, both authors find Truth in the radically particular and radically subjective experiences of individuals, and, in order to render each of these experiences meaningfully to the world at large, attempt to construct aesthetics which synthesize individual experience while simultaneously maintaining an understanding of each consciousness' desires.

I will make no claim to each authors' philosophical allegiances; I will not suggest that one author is a staunch Bergsonian or an adamant Husserlian. In fact, I hope to do quite the contrary. That is, each author's work speaks volumes about the phenomenological-ontological positions held by each author. These positions, I contend, can best be understood aesthetically. Their art, indeed the very act of creating, signifies their continually shifting positions on the spectrum whose poles read "objective" and "subjective." Woolf and Faulkner's aesthetics take on a similar multiplicity of tasks. They often take up the task of unifying fragments in order to find meaning where it has been shattered. Woolf's own description of her aesthetic philosophy offer the best insight into the necessity of artist creation as a unifying act. Describing the essence of what constitutes reality, Woolf writes, "It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole, this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together." What is real is often painful—Woolf iterates the existential anguish that explodes in the works of

Sartre and Heidegger. Woolf continues, describing how making things whole through writing becomes a philosophy: "...behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (*A Sketch of the Past* 72). Thus the connection to existential phenomenology becomes clear. The world is that medium in which and of which humans are. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes reality in similar terms as Woolf: "The real is a closely woven fabric...The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making...Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (xi). The passing and flowing that becomes so evident in Woolf's writing and the inevitable progression of time in Faulkner's are indicative of the same condition: that we, as beings in the world, are immersed in something that is perpetually in flux. However, by conceptualizing existence as itself a work of art, Woolf finds the possibility for human agency. That is, just as the world perpetually remakes itself, so can individuals exert creative will to make for themselves a home in the world by interacting with it, not retreating from it.

In the following pages I hope to show two authors whose writing was bound up with representing the traumatic existential condition of humanity, which was only magnified by modernity. The nature of this condition, however, is not my primary focus. That is, I cannot attest to the fact that human nature changed on or about December 1910, but the very fact that Woolf and Faulkner felt the need to experiment so radically with their prose suggests a desire to portray *the way in which people encountered the world* more accurately. Furthermore, both authors' writing was not merely an artistic act for the

sake of solipsistic aestheticism. Rather, both writers believed that art was a constitutive element of reality and had the ability to affect humanity in a positive way. Faulkner and Woolf both want to reconcile the subject-object binary by affirming the importance of the subjective experience and the necessary and ultimately unifying existence of an objective world in which and in reaction to which subjective experiences occur. This reconciliation comes, as I will show, through artistic creation and communal optimism. Proximity, both among character consciousness and in the writing of the text itself, is the driving force of this reconciliation. I will begin by analyzing the fragmented consciousnesses of each novel. Faulkner's Compson family will, as we shall see, be most representative of the subjectivist position. That is, characters in *The Sound and the Fury* cannot find meaning in their own existences and struggle and ultimately fail to connect with those around them. Likewise, I will interrogate the way in which Woolf's aesthetic reflects notions of Bergsonian subjectivity, by jumping in and out of different consciousnesses to convey the fragmented perceptions and thoughts of individual characters, exemplifying the disjointed nature of each of their realities. Then, having established the nature of each author's aesthetic of fragmentation, I will show how each author seeks reconciliation and reunification. Faulkner's characters never find meaning; however, the authorial construction of the novel demands that the reader reconstruct from the four juxtaposed fragments (five once we consider the 1945 Appendix) a meaningful community of seemingly disparate voices. Woolf, on the other hand, is more successful in finding an aesthetic balance between subjective and objective. In *Lily Briscoe* and the novel's shifting narrative voice, Woolf brings together all of her characters' consciousnesses and ultimately synthesizes a constructive dialogue. Woolf confronts a shattered objective

reality with a communal phenomenology in which her characters use proximity to “make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home” (11).

Chapter I  
*The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner's Failed Unity of Experience*

*Ben's voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place. (The Sound and the Fury 199)*

The final passage of Faulkner's 1929 masterpiece seems to signify inexhaustibly. The novel begins with Benjy's inner voice, his consciousness; it ends outside of Benjy as he expresses himself in a despairing roar. Yet the finality of that expression is tempered immediately by Luster's reaction: he glances quickly over his shoulder and then drives on. Nothing seems out of the ordinary in this situation. The bellowing of a thirty-three year old man seems quite normal. Once Luster corrects the course of the wagon in the proper direction around the town square, Benjy is calmed and everything falls back in its "ordered place," seeming to signify yet again a unity and finality. The chaos of the previous three sections has been "ordered" and the novel concludes as any other, with linear progress from left to right—the order in which we read words on a page and turn pages towards a book's end. However, this resolution is only temporary. We end with the same character with whom we began, but we are not *in* the novel's most fragile consciousness. Rather, a third-person narrator focalizes his narration through Benjy's experience. The smooth, ordered flow of Benjy's perceptions is only temporary, and given to us from outside of his consciousness—only a mask, like the façades and cornices passing by. One wrong turn, one wrong word, and the flux and chaos of Benjy's reality could erupt, shattering the façade of a unified experience. The bellowing will inevitably resume. Faulkner's novel is a desperate attempt to put everything in its ordered place—to

temporarily stay the roaring sound and fury of human existence, for man's "tragedy is the impossibility—or at least the tremendous difficulty—of communication" (*Lion in the Garden* 70). In *The Sound and the Fury* this tragedy is even more complex, and this becomes evident in the final passage above, which illuminates the incapability of Benjy's consciousness to perceive and understand fully the world in which he exists.

Furthermore, his furious bellowing is a direct outcome of the fragmentation of Benjy's phenomenal world and his inability to communicate his desires and traumas to an audience (here Luster) willing to acknowledge that he is in fact an autonomous subject. Thus the novel ends in a consciousness which has achieved temporary and extraordinarily fragile coherence. The world *seems* in order. But, as the novel tells us, the "place" where everything seems to be in order is exactly the opposite. The place of Faulkner's study of modern consciousness is the Deep South.

The Compson family is disintegrating as the plantation aristocracy of the Old South becomes anachronistic in the modern South. Ashis Sengupta accurately assesses that "[it] is customary to look on *The Sound and the Fury*...as a socio-economic study of the decline of a post bellum southern family. But such an interpretation is not adequate" (101). The socio-historical ground of the novel is undeniably influential, as it supplies a particular experience of modernity about which to write. However, Faulkner's aims seem much grander than providing a bit of local tragic color. The novel is not merely an exploration of "the historical production of selves," as John T. Matthews suggests in *Seeing through the South*, but rather an exploration of selves embedded in and responding to a world of which the historical moment is only a small part. This is a novel of

individual selves struggling to live in the world, to negotiate relationships, to come to terms with change.

Ashis Sengupta describes the novel as “a collection of separate perspectives, each presenting at best a tentative pattern of significance, a lonely truth” (100). Unlike the realist novel which, as it unfolds in time, reveals more information for the reader and progresses towards a conclusion, Faulkner’s 1929 novel is a *tour de force* of modernist fragmentation—as the novel progresses nothing is resolved—no final truth or systematic, shared understanding is reached; in fact, conflicts seem irreconcilable and in many instances become more and more confused as different narrative consciousnesses color the novel’s events with their own subjective perceptions and feelings. This flux, however, is not the ideal fluidity of Bergsonian *durée*. Each of the novel’s four sections are relatively fluid. That is, the individual consciousnesses (I will note the significant differences of the narrative consciousness in the Dilsey section later) are fluid in the reckoning of their own perceptions, memories, and emotions. However, the novel is structured to include three monumental breaks at the end of the first three sections. The reader is presented with a very difficult challenge when transitioning from consciousness to consciousness. Just as the reader becomes accustomed to Benjy’s impressionistic mind which perceives the present eternally, she runs into a brick wall that is the narrative transition to Quentin’s introspective, temporally unbounded recollection of the past, which regularly erupts into the present. Then, having been immersed in the flow of Quentin’s stream of consciousness, the reader is assaulted by the aggressive internal monologue of Jason Compson. Finally, the reader is confronted by what seems like a

return to the realist novel, but which is actually a fragmented exposé of the shortcomings of omniscience.

This structure of fluidity punctuated by moments of intense rupture is indicative not just of an experimental literary form, but also a specific understanding of (or struggle with) the schism between subject and object. Donald Kartiganer describes Faulkner's novels as

a wrenching free from the available possibilities of literary form and a deliberate summons to the reader to attend to that fact. The novel splinters a commonly, conventionally known world into the vital reality of its separate pieces, and then makes its own recovery, its struggle for a comprehensible design, the central drama. Such a design, however, when a novel can move to it, can only be the precarious form that discloses the fact of its impending dissolution. (*The Fragile Thread* xv)

Here Kartiganer notes the multiple layers of fragmentation in Faulkner's novels, but he also suggests Faulkner's authorial desire to intentionally shatter the "conventionally known world"—the static, comprehensible "realist" world of surface-level facts—in order to reveal the vital essences which lurk beneath the surface. Yet in constructing his own artificial vision of reality he makes any vital coming together impossible. That is, Faulkner excels in revealing life-as-motion, but he fails to move the radically individual experiences of life to a more comprehensible communal understanding. For in a communal phenomenology vitality is essential, but only insofar as it works to converge individual experience towards a form of communion in which desires are acknowledged and autonomous selfhood validated. The individual characters in Faulkner's novel,

however, are relegated to their own subjective realities, barred from knowing the other or understanding the outside world; the reader is denied a coherent structure from which to make sense of the novel as a unified whole; and Faulkner himself, it seems, discovered the impossibility of recovering an insoluble meaning from the disparate narrative threads represented by each of the novel's narrative consciousnesses.

For Faulkner, the novel "grew." He "wrote that same story" of "some children being sent away from the house during the grandmother's funeral" "four times." The organic growth of the novel, which Faulkner describes as a parent would his rowdy child, mirrors the conscious struggles of each of the novel's characters:

...I was still trying to tell one story which moved me very much and each time I failed, but I had put so much anguish into that I couldn't throw it away, like the mother that had four bad children, that she would have been better off if they all had been eliminated, but she couldn't relinquish any of them. And that's the reason I have the most tenderness for that book, because it failed four times. (*Lion in the Garden* 147)

The symbolic force, as Kartiganer notes, of *The Sound and the Fury* is driven by what Faulkner reads as his failure to tell *one* story. However, if we are to regard art as an attempt to convey something of real life and if we are to take consciousness as the irreducible basis of human experience, then in Faulkner's failure we can find a valuable representation of the self's often traumatic experience of struggling to make connections with the world outside of itself. As an author, Faulkner found it impossible to tell the same story from four different perspectives, and, as a consequence, told a haunting story

of the near impossibility of making sense of four different experiences of the world as they were seen, felt, and heard through four different consciousnesses.

Criticism of Faulkner's aesthetic in *The Sound and the Fury* begins with Jean-Paul Sartre's 1939 narrow critique, which renders Faulkner's masterpiece a hopeless, backward-looking, pathetic representation of ineffectual humanity. Faulkner's worldview, for Sartre, can be symbolized by "a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards. At every moment, formless shadows, flickering, faint trembling and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterwards, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars" (267). While this reading is certainly accurate in some instances—it seems a particularly accurate description of Quentin Compson—Sartre simplifies the complex web of interconnected experiences of time that Faulkner portrays in *The Sound and the Fury*. Each character struggles with time and experiences the same objective reality. That is, their lives revolve around the same events (primarily the loss of Caddy), but they experience these events subjectively—showing the various phenomenal apprehensions of individual consciousnesses. Sartre's reading also offers a useful examination of the modernist artist's purpose. In a modern world characterized by perpetual change which demanded of the individual immediate self-reflection and remaking, the artist offered a perspective capable of making sense of the trees and people past which the automobile sped.

In a 1955 interview towards the end of his career, Faulkner said, "Since people exist only in life, they must devote their time simply to being alive. Life is motion and motion is concerned with what makes man move—which are ambition, power, pleasure. What time man can devote to morality, he must take by force from the motion of which

he is a part” (*Lion in the Garden* 253). Faulkner echoes the crisis of the modern described by Marshall Berman as “striving to make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home” (*All that is Solid Melts into Air* 11). For Faulkner, though, it is not modernity against which man must act, but life, and, as a necessary part of life, human desires which propel action. In the confusion of the multitude of often competing desires that compose social and communal realities, man must take—and here Faulkner makes clear that this is the artist’s primary function—from this motion, not an external source of platonic ideals, what is beautiful and good. The unstoppable motion of life is both a blessing and a curse for Faulkner; as I noted earlier, Susan Stanford Friedman writes, “The lifeblood of modernity’s chaos is its order. The impulse to order is the product of chaos” (510). Faulkner’s Bergsonian vitalism becomes even clearer as the interview continues:

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, *it moves again since it is life*. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move. This is the artist’s way of scribbling “Kilroy was here” on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass. (my emphasis *Lion in the Garden* 253)

Since man is a being-toward-death and since that motion can never be halted, the artist’s purpose is to immortalize human existence in static representations of modern life. This is the paradox faced by modernists like Faulkner and Woolf, whose Mrs. Ramsay says, “the thing is made that endures” (105). How then do you arrest a moment and immortalize it

on the page so that, when read by some later generation, it bursts into life and *moves again?*

I contend that many modernists—Faulkner and Woolf are here my exemplary cases—strove for an aesthetic that conveyed the sense of a communal phenomenology, which, by assimilating the most minute details and desires of individual experiences into a powerful collective voice that refuses to erase individuality, arrests the motion of life so that we may, at least for a moment, witness humanity on both the minutest and grandest of scales. Unfortunately, much of the criticism devoted to Faulkner’s work is devoted to deconstructing the humanistic capabilities of art to signify meaningful human experiences. In Kartiganer’s assessment of the fragile thread of Faulkner’s form, we see a resistance to imposing Truth on the novel: “The order achieved, when it is achieved, is not a substitution of system for chaos, a mythic method providing the right blocks to spell God, but the design that never denies its dubious status, its origins in contingency” (xvii). The contingency of Faulkner’s novel of consciousness is its premise. Order for Kartiganer is temporary and Faulkner is working only to exacerbate or make clear the absolute contingency of subjective life upon which the novel is based. Kartiganer concludes his analysis of the novel: “Acknowledging, insisting on decreation, making real the time prior to prearrangement, *The Sound and the Fury* yet strives for wholeness, an articulation of design: the form not imposed like a myth from the past, but the form that is the consequence of contingent of being...And so the novel sits like a stillborn colossus, always on the verge of beginning” (*The Fragile Thread* 22). Thus Faulkner’s greatest novel is a novel about the failure of art, a story that fails to begin, a form that expresses the inadequacy of form, a creation that decreates.

John Matthews's Derridean approach in *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (1982) arrives at a similar conclusion. Matthews argues that Faulkner's early works "explore how the writer embodies himself in his art, how objects of representation acquires presence through the mediation of language, how writing implicates the writer in an economy of losses (the loss of the original idea or of completed meaning, for example), and how the truth of a story emerges from the play of its language" (18). As with Kartiganer, we have an image of Faulkner reveling in the chaos of unmeaning and linguistic play.<sup>2</sup> I do not contest the notion that *The Sound and the Fury* rejects the finality of, for instance, a Victorian bildungsroman which builds towards a culminating moment of enduring meaning. However, I do contend that Faulkner did not intend to implicate himself in an "economy of losses", but rather to fight against such a stultifying notion. Matthews continues his Derridean exploration of Faulkner's aesthetic of loss:

All modes of representation, whether 'internal' to consciousness or 'external' as expression, are structured like language. Normally we assume a plenitude that *is* the mind of a character or author behind the words, gestures, or behavior that embody some portion of that original presence. But Faulkner's fiction, like other modern literature, challenges the consequences of the 'metaphysics of presence.' (30)

Again, I agree that Faulkner eventually falls short of achieving coherence and unity, but this statement is problematic on multiple levels. First, we need not assume that

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<sup>2</sup> Ashis Sengupta, echoing Kartiganer, arrives at the same conclusion: "The novel...appears to be an anthology of fictional forms, each one of which Faulkner tests in telling the Compson tale and finds wanting. However, this failure becomes itself 'the form, and therefore the meaning,' of *The Sound and the Fury*. (Kartiganer 340) Art cannot illuminate the real when there is no touchstone of veracity in life" (109-110).

consciousness is structured like language. For Faulkner it seems that consciousness is structured like consciousness, something irreducible beyond itself. Thus the complications for art arise when one attempts to translate consciousness into language. Furthermore, Faulkner's views of writing, the artist's purpose, and the text of *The Sound and the Fury* suggest a metaphysics entirely bound up in presence and an aesthetic concerned primarily with representing the lived experience of the individual consciousness.

Here we must turn to Faulkner's proclaimed allegiance to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who understood reality in terms of presence. *La durée*, that which we feel in its immediate presence, is the stuff of life. Thus Bergson endows emotions, memories, and other subjective experiences with the same authority given intellectually analyzable phenomena by the objective realist; for Bergson, "Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states" (*Time and Free Will* 60). Bergsonian intuition is a method of diving into presence and experiencing life in its pure flux, without the traumatic spatial boundaries of history. Bergson later identifies *élan vital*, the generative impulse which propels life and creation forward in its perpetual becoming: "we are creating ourselves continually" (*Creative Evolution* 174). As with *durée*, *élan vital* is immune to analytical, formulaic determinism because "the same reasons may dictate to different persons, or to the same person at different moments, acts profoundly different, although equally reasonable" (*Creative Evolution* 174). Bergson's *élan vital* offers a compelling parallel to Faulkner's authorial tendencies. In an interview with a French graduate student, Loic Bouvard, Faulkner acknowledges his conception of

god as “a deity very close to Bergson’s,” who is not “a personified or a mechanical God, but a God who is the most complete expression of mankind, a God who rests both in eternity and in the now.” For Faulkner it is man’s, specifically the artist’s, duty to embrace this Bergsonian vital impulse: “Man...is free and he is responsible, terribly responsible. His tragedy is the impossibility—or at least the tremendous difficulty—of communication. But man keeps on trying endlessly to express himself and to make contact with other human beings” (*Lion in the Garden* 70-71). Bergson notes the impossibility of representing pure duration in literature; for once you put an experience into words, you abstract it from its original immediacy—the object or experience becomes a shadow of its true self. Yet he praises the novelist who “arrange[s] this shadow in such a way as to make us suspect the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object...he has made us reflect by giving outward expression to something of that contradiction, that interpenetration, which is the very essence of the elements expressed” (*Time and Free Will* 75). For Faulkner and Bergson language is ultimately tragic in that we can never fully express ourselves to the other. However, Faulkner’s vital impulse to create and make contact necessitates his desperate but valiant effort to bring together four perspectives in *The Sound and the Fury* in an attempt to find communal meaning in the interpenetration of human experience.

Here we can look through Matthews’s historical lens for clarification. Matthews describes the way in which the Faulknerian self is inevitably tied up with its community:

*The Sound and the Fury* captures, with heart-rending eloquence and beauty, the special idiosyncrasies of every individual self, yet it also grasps how even the most intimate of feelings and thoughts are undeniably

woven from the fabric of social life. As such, it anticipates Faulkner's lifelong concentration on the tension between one's private self and one's community, between the individual and history, a person and his or her people. (83)

This undeniable influence of the individual's past on his present and his community on his own identity need not limit free will—a huge part of our individual identity is certainly bound up in social interaction, but there still remains a conscious self which is responding to social phenomena with its own desires. That is, the self is determined through an ongoing process of both reception and projection. Thus communication becomes an essential factor in determining individual and communal identities.

Furthermore, as the individual's community changes, or rapidly decays in the case of the plantation-holding families of the Old South at the turn of the twentieth century, the self must change—else the tension rend an irreconcilable schism between the private self and its contemporary community. Faulkner perfectly elucidates this tension with the erosion of the Compson family. Yet Matthews's reading here is hopelessly deterministic and renders the “special idiosyncrasies of every individual self” a product of “social life.” The self is not only struggling against the determining forces of the community—Quentin's antiquated chivalric romance comes to mind—but also desperately trying to assimilate the incoming with the outgoing. The Faulknerian self is not merely a mirror of its social conditions, nor is it a narcissistic projection of the self onto the world. Rather, Faulkner desires an expression of self that is a synthesis of the voices of the other with the special idiosyncrasies of the self. However, each of the Compson brothers fails to actualize this

vision, and the author and reader must struggle to piece together the heteroglossia which the novel's characters are unable to realize.

Justin Skirry offers a useful but similarly limiting analysis of Faulkner's traumatized characters: "Faulkner was not looking to describe the lived experience of all human beings, but rather was describing and expressing a distinctly southern experience that non-southerners could feel so deeply they almost believed they experienced it themselves" (40). Like Matthews, Skirry reads Faulkner's aesthetics and metaphysics as clearly determined by the historical context in which Faulkner was writing. In this reading the Compson family story is wholly determined by the traumatic decline of the planter aristocracy of the Old South. This reading is important and certainly valid. Faulkner's first encounters with modernity were Southern and many of his own experiences paralleled those of his characters; however, Faulkner's aims went beyond regionalism and to ignore the universal ambitions of Faulkner's fiction would be to deny the significance of his aesthetic innovations and struggles. Just as Woolf gives a contextually significant picture of bourgeois life in England, Faulkner reflects the turmoil in the post-Reconstruction South. What is more, though, is their shared struggle to create an aesthetic that brackets history in an attempt to resist its determining power, and, as Matthews says of Faulkner's work, forces "readers to abandon familiar ways of making sense of the world and to attend closely to what new methods of representation could show them" about lived experience (Matthews 108).

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## Denied Agency: Benjy's Exiled Consciousness

Faulkner begins *The Sound and the Fury* by dropping the reader into a consciousness that conceives of itself as a self, but which, for the reader, is constituted by the entirety of the world in which it exists. Benjy Compson narrates his story from the first person, indicating at least a degree of selfhood—Benjy recognizes that he is a distinct person, different from those around him. He narrates his section using the pronoun “I.” However, he does not possess the mental mechanisms necessary to fully comprehend and order his feelings and perceptions into coherent thoughts, nor can he act in the world. He can only move about, often guided by his caretaker (Caddy, Luster, or Versh). Benjy's consciousness is thus limited both internally in its ability to apprehend and order phenomena and externally in its ability to interact with others. I will approach Benjy's inability to comprehend and participate in a communal phenomenology from two directions: first, I consider Benjy's difficulty in reconciling the objective world with his own subjective world, and second, I map his inability to insert his own voice into a narrative composed wholly from the dialogue of others. Benjy's inability to speak is the key for understanding Faulkner's search for a communal phenomenology that attempts to account for every consciousness.

Benjy recognizes his perceptions, in this case seeing, and his situation as a being in space: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting” (3). Here he manifests a rudimentary sense of depth perception, which is imperative to his understanding of himself as distinct from that which is outside of him; that which he perceives is other. Where Benjy's consciousness falls short is his inability to comprehend and categorize according to social and linguistic norms what is happening

outside of himself. Thus the people he is watching through the fence and flowers “were coming toward where the flag was...They took the flag out, and they were hitting” (3). Benjy registers action and change, but not the purpose of that action. The golfers are merely moving and doing. This inability to recognize social and contextual significance results in Benjy’s tragic inability to assimilate his sensations and perceptions and then, having understood that which happens in the same world in which he exists, speak and exert his own will as a free agent. Benjy makes clear the two distinct levels of subjectivity: the phenomenal, embodied self that perceives and the communicative self that participates in the world through language and social recognition. He can only feel the outside world, a feeling that is more often than not disorienting and traumatic for both Benjy and the reader, whom Faulkner traps in the flawed consciousness by providing no reprieve in the form of an omniscient narrator or otherwise lucid consciousness that might aid the reader in interpreting Benjy’s experience.

Criticism of *The Sound and the Fury* often reads Benjy as an entirely incompetent being, incapable of any thought and void of self-consciousness. Paul Douglass tells us that “he lives in a tortured Now in which sensory stimuli automatically evoke memories recorded in their exact order of occurrence and represented to consciousness with the intensity of present objects. He cannot make voluntary connects, draw parallels, or learn from experience...He sees people as volitionless objects that materialize and disappear” (*Bergson, Eliot, & American Literature* 146). Benjy is certainly incapable of controlling the direction of his consciousness. Time is especially fragile for Benjy. As Douglass notes, one sight, smell, or sound can trigger a shift in Benjy’s temporal consciousness, rendering a past memory vividly present—such as when he becomes snagged on a nail in

1928 and is immediately transported to the same space but in a different time, 1898 (*Pryse* 26). The memory in this case is automatic—violently intuitive, to use Bergsonian terminology.

William Sowder invokes the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to arrive at a similar judgment of Benjy's perceptive shortcomings. Merleau-Ponty, Sowder notes, "divests perception of all mentalistic processes and [places] it...in the body." Unlike Bergson, who argues that all experience and perception is invested with subjective significance, Merleau-Ponty suggests that "[m]y body with its senses...is the source of my orientation with the world." This is paramount in Sowder's analysis of Benjy: "In the study of those persons who, like Benjy, move about in bodies of human beings but who are without mental capacity, this theory is all-important, for it allows us rare insights into a consciousness that could not bring figure and ground together in a way that makes perceptual sense" (Sowder 4-5). This reading, like Douglass's, makes it very difficult to attribute meaning to Benjy's experiences of the world. Because, in these readings, Benjy's mental capacity to comprehend the world he perceives and the very conscious mechanism of perception are flawed, we can never be sure that Benjy is seeing or understanding the same reality of the other characters. Sowder's reading renders Benjy a flawed machine that "is still stumbling about somewhere in Yoknapatawpha out there somewhere as confused as ever" (19). Douglass, on the other hand, notes, "Benjy's is an infant's consciousness in an adult's body, a consciousness of astounding immaturity, whose images have been translated by Faulkner into calculatedly transparent verbiage"—"He is a being without self-consciousness" (Douglass 147). For Douglass, Benjy's problem is his underdeveloped intellect and lack of self awareness. I have already shown

that Benjy has at least a degree of the latter. However, even in a Bergsonian reading, the consciousness is still a free agent participating in the rush of immediate experience.

Benjy does not participate in his experience—he lacks the ability to formulate creative responses to flux. That is, things happen to Benjy, Benjy does not happen to things. Thus Benjy is no Bergsonian hero reveling in pure *durée*. Rather, his consciousness, in Douglass's mind, is a blank screen devoid of mental processes upon which pure perceptions are projected. We must find a balance between the two to give Benjy's experience of the world human meaning—to make Benjy signify on the communal level—for both himself and the reader.

The meaning we do gain from Benjy's experience comes from what he hears and his attempts to communicate, especially with Caddy. Faulkner conveys the entirety of Benjy's experience through his sensual perceptions and rudimentary thoughts. Benjy's inability to differentiate his feelings is well documented. Early in the novel when we encounter Benjy's obsession with waiting at the gate, this becomes quite evident. Versh, after dressing Benjy according to Mrs. Compson's strict directives, escorts him to the front yard. Benjy immediately moves towards the gate, anticipating Caddy's return, to which Versh responds, "Where you heading for... You don't think you going to town, does you" (4). Interestingly, none of the questions posed in the Benjy section are properly punctuated. These questions end as if they were simple declarative statements, signaling Benjy's failure to grasp tonal signification and thus his inability to reconcile the many complexities of communication. In this same scene Benjy also further reveals his lack of sensory recognition: "I couldn't feel the gate at all, but I could smell the bright cold" (4). In one statement Benjy conflates three senses: smell, sight, and touch. Importantly, the

feeling of cold and the brightness of the sun are filtered through the sense of smell, a mistake which Benjy's consciousness will make throughout his life. Benjy experiences further sensory overlap when he hides in the library watching Quentin, whom he identifies primarily by smell just as he does her mother: "*She smelled like trees. In the corner it was dark, but I could see the window. I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn't see it but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself, but my hands could see the slipper, and I squatted there, hearing it get dark*" (46). Here Benjy loses perception of himself, but not narrative recognition of the "I" experiencing the world. Benjy's synesthetic experience is directed towards two things: the simultaneous smell of Quentin and Caddy as evoked in the single slipper and the enveloping darkness that threatens his own subjective stability and symbolizes Caddy's loss.

In Benjy's memory of the past before Caddy's exile, we learn of the euphoria Benjy experiences every day when Caddy returns from school and greets him at the gate: "Hello Benjy.' Caddy said. She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves. 'Did you come to meet me.' She said. 'Did you come to meet Caddy', and further on: "'Did you come to meet Caddy.' She said, rubbing my hands. 'What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy.' Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we were asleep" (5). Caddy greets him as she would any other person with a "Hello," unlike the rest of the family, who address Benjy either indirectly through commands to his caretakers, or through reprimands. Ted Roggenbuck notes that "[for] Benjy, crying involves his intentions and relates closely to saying" (583). His mother reacts to these attempts to communicate, which are expressed by moans or cries, by

snapping at him as if her were a misbehaving child: “‘You, Benjamin.’ Mother said. ‘If you don’t be good, you’ll have to go to the kitchen’” (4). His attempts to communicate his desire to go outside to wait for Caddy are squelched. Furthermore, his broken attempts to speak are regarded as misbehavior by Mrs. Compson—they violate her notions of appropriate interaction.

It is no wonder, then, that Benjy spends his days anticipating Caddy’s return to the Compson house. Caddy acknowledges Benjy as an autonomous subject and attempts to engage him in conversation, albeit rudimentary conversation composed of questions to which she already knows the answers. But, even when Caddy is not sure of what Benjy is attempting to say, she asks him, “What are you trying to tell Caddy,” instead of dismissing him or demanding his silence. Furthermore, Caddy, the vital center of the novel, realizes, according to Sowder, that “[the] best way to move Benjy was not by voice but by touch...” (8). Although Benjy is often overwhelmed by sensory input, confusing sight for smell or even sight for physical contact, touch brings home to Benjy his existence in an objective world populated by others, not volitionless objects. But such a reading still renders Benjy incapable of interaction beyond touch. It diagnoses him with the same incapacity as does his mother: “Someday I’ll be gone, and you’ll have to think for him.” He is her “poor baby” incapable of any autonomous thought or feeling; Caroline denies the significance of his experience in the world—he is merely a person-shaped object shambling about her house, the result of “a judgement on” her (4). Caroline enacts the ultimate denial of Benjy’s selfhood by projecting herself and her problems onto her son. Caddy rejects this by hugging Benjy and pressing her face against his—intimate communication through touch—and by acknowledging his consciousness’s

autonomy: “You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. Haven’t you got your Caddy.” Unfortunately, in the narrative present, Benjy does not have his Caddy any more. His only human interactions are negative in that his experience is denied importance and his attempts to voice his desires are regarded as annoyances or burdensome. These words in his memory trigger a return to the present in which Luster is berating him for bellowing. Caddy’s attempts to engage Benjy are replaced with Luster’s command to “shut up that moaning and slobbering”; even Dilsey forces Benjy around, manipulating him as if he were entirely incapable of thinking and moving for himself: “’Git in, now, and set still until your maw come.’ Dilsey said. She shoved me into the carriage” (6).

Sowder, although he acknowledges Benjy’s ability to connect through touch, states, “His communication with her never went beyond the perceptual level... Benjy was closer to Caddy than he was to anyone else because she was the one who touched him more than anyone else and more importantly encouraged him to touch her. When Caddy was not there, her slipper was. Benjy loved this object because, like Caddy it felt smooth and because it *looked* like something he wanted to touch. Like Caddy, it invited him to touch it” (8-9). Benjy’s relationship with Caddy goes far beyond his desire for physical contact. He was closer to Caddy because she acknowledged him as an individual by giving him the opportunity to speak and attempting to make sense of it. His attachment to Caddy’s slipper is not one of mere tangibility. We know how fragile Benjy’s temporal consciousness is. If simple words can make Caddy present, then an object which belonged to her and smells like her is invaluable to Benjy for it makes manifest in Benjy’s abnormal consciousness Caddy’s *presence*. This reveals the multidimensional tragedy of Benjy’s consciousness. The word “Caddy” brings to Benjy’s consciousness a

reality in which Caddy exists in the present, but this presence is always negated when he returns to the actual present in which Caddy is absent, thus revealing language's failure to make permanent our desires. Furthermore, for Benjy, the other is the only one capable of speaking Caddy into presence for he cannot utter her name. Thus he is barred from constructing his own fantasy-reality, as Quentin will later. Not only is Benjy fundamentally incapable of participating in the communal phenomenology, in which experiences and desires are expressed as language, but he also reveals the difficulty of more primal signification. As I have shown, Caddy moves and communicates with him through language, but even more meaningfully by touch. However, as with linguistic signifiers, the slipper can stand in for Caddy's body as a signifier which only momentarily satisfies Benjy's desire for a human connection with the signified other.

Because of his flawed consciousness, his experience of the world will never be whole or unified, but Benjy seems at times capable of recognizing social situations and the emotions of others. Roggenbuck analyzes various moments in Benjy's consciousness in which he exhibits cognitive ability: he is able to compare past and present events with words like *even* and *when* (Roggenbuck 588); he recognizes togetherness and emotional awareness with Caddy (Roggenbuck 589); and, most significantly, he possesses interpretive capabilities (Roggenbuck 590). Roggenbuck notes Benjy's awareness of his father's mood after Damuddy's death: "The way he looked said Hush" (39). Without an awareness and memory of his father's facial expressions or the ability to associate verbal commands—"Hush"—with stern looks, Benjy could never posit such a thought. Thus Benjy is clearly a being who is aware of both his surroundings and the feelings of others.

Caddy's perfume triggers some of Benjy's most astonishing reactions. He dislikes the perfume not because it proves that she is sleeping with a man and that such a thing is unthinkable for a young, unmarried Southern woman. Such a complex chain of connections through social customs would be unimaginable for Benjy. Rather, he associates the smell of her perfume with her absence—trees with her return—and strife in the home. Whenever Caddy returns smelling like perfume, the house erupts into violence. Here Benjy confronts his sister, pleading, in his own way, for her to stay home and never wear her perfume again:

'Why, Benjy. What is it.' She said. 'You mustn't cry. Caddy's not going away. See here.' She said. She took up the bottle and took the stopper out and held it to my nose. 'Sweet. Smell. Good.' I went away and I didn't hush, and she held the bottle in her hand, looking at me. 'Oh.' she said. She put the bottle down and came and put her arms around me. 'So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn't tell her. You wanted to, but you couldn't, could you. Of course Caddy wont. Of course Caddy wont.' (27)

Caddy engages him, as always, with gentle accommodation. She recognizes that he thinks she is "going away" and, when she tries to comfort him with the sweet smell of the perfume, realizes that his reaction signifies his dislike for the perfume as well as her absence. She rejoins the "conversation" with "Oh" as if she suddenly realized the point that the other was trying to make. She then touches him and describes perfectly Benjy's inability to communicate verbally. He was "*trying* to tell Caddy" but he "*couldn't* tell

her.” Furthermore, he “*wanted to, but couldn’t.*” Caddy acknowledges Benjy’s malady without disregarding his desires and his attempts to express them.

Whereas Caddy always recognizes his “trying to say”, his family and, perhaps more importantly the community of Jefferson, are unable and unwilling to comprehend what Benjy is trying to express. After Caddy has run away, Benjy persists in waiting for her at the gate. Every day schoolgirls “passed with their booksatchels”, but they do not acknowledge him in the same way as Caddy. They perceive him as an oddity, a dangerous object: “They looked at me, walking fast, with their heads turned. I tried to say, but they went on, and I went along the fence, trying to say, and they went faster. Then they were running and I came to the corner of the fence and I couldn’t go any further, and I held to the fence, looking after them and trying to say (33). Benjy tries desperately to communicate with the passing school girls, *trying to say*. They run away terrified and Benjy follows, running along the opposite side of the fence, holding and *feeling* the it and maintaining his own balance. This encounter with the schoolgirls results in a failure of verbal communication, which he is well accustomed to in his own house.

However, the next time he encounters the same girls the consequences are tragic:

They came on. I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off of my face, but the bright shapes were going again. They were going up the hill to where it fell away and I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn’t breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from

falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright whirling shapes.

(34)

We might read this section as the climax of the Benjy section in which Benjy's inability to communicate results in catastrophe. Had Caddy, the only person who appreciates Benjy's attempts to speak, been there to greet him, the chain of events that eventually results in his castration—a symbolic loss of self or masculine agency—would not have occurred. When he escapes through the gate, Benjy is rejected on his most primal level of communication: touch. When he touches Caddy the gesture is returned with tenderness and cooing speech; when he catches the school girl he is rebuffed with screams and physical violence. Touch goes horribly awry for Benjy—the order to which his consciousness is accustomed is interrupted and he panics. The subject-object barrier is disrupted to such an extent that the ostensible punch thrown by the girl becomes part of his face and he tries to dislodge it. He is further displaced spatially as he feels that he is inside the bright shapes—the disorientation of being hit in the head. The very ground of his reality is radically changed because of this failed communication. His existence becomes claustrophobic; he is trapped in disorder and flux. He resorts to his most rudimentary form of “speech” by trying to cry, but his panic prevents him. He finally loses his balance and falls unconscious not into the smooth flowing shapes he sees when he falls asleep with Caddy, but a chaotic mess of “bright, whirling shapes” (34). Here the community's symbolic rejection of Benjy's attempts to communicate manifests itself physically. Benjy's communicative self is denied by the other and his phenomenal self shatters simultaneously. Thus not only does the climax entail a massive communication

breakdown, but Benjy's phenomenal world breaks down into a vortex of unrecognizable shapes.

His failure to make complex connections and communicate his thoughts and feelings results in a narrative in which the reader is forced to assume the interpretive role, even in the most basic plot-level circumstances. Benjy has no control over his identity. It is constituted by the voices of those around him and the reader's interpretations. This becomes quite literal in the narrative when the Compsons fight over Benjy's name, which we learn of, again, not through Benjy's own thoughts about the situation, but by other people's discussion of it in his proximity. Here Dilsey calls Benjy by his original name Maury—the name of Caroline's brother—which Caroline changed when she realized Benjy's mental deficiencies:

*Reckon Maury going to let me cry on him a while, too. His name's Benjy now, Caddy said. How come it is, Dilsey said. He aint wore out the name he was born with yet, is he. Benjamin came out of the bible, Caddy said. It's a better name for him than Maury was. How come it is, Dilsey said. Mother says it is, Caddy said. Hush, Dilsey said. Name aint going to help him. Hurt him, neither. Folks don't have no luck, changing names. My name been Dilsey since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forget me. (37)*

Here Caddy relays the shift in Benjy's superficial identity. She even notes the moral superiority of Benjamin, a biblical name, instead of Maury, the name of her deadbeat uncle. When Dilsey questions this, Caddy replies that Benjy's name has been changed because mother says so, to which Dilsey replies nonsense. Although Dilsey notes that

there is no essential relationship between name and identity, the symbolic significance of this name change bears an immense weight for a person incapable of voicing himself. Because language is the essential conduit through which we make our personal experiences meaningful on a communal plane, the debate over Benjy's name is the literal (though on the symbolic, linguistic level) appropriation of Benjy's identity by several others. Later Caddy calls him "Benjy" in front of Caroline, who responds, "I told you not to call him that. It was bad enough when your father insisted on calling you by that silly nickname, and I will not have him called by one. Nicknames are vulgar. Only common people use them. Benjamin" (41). Thus Benjy becomes the receptacle for various definitions of his own identity. Dilsey calls him Maury, his original, family name, Caddy affectionately labels him Benjy, a title which connotes his childlike innocence, and Caroline invests her disgust with the Compson line's vulgarity in her refusal to call him Benjy, opting for Benjamin instead. Caroline attempts to convey this identity into Benjy physically: "'Benjamin.' She said. She took my face in her hands and turned it to hers. 'Benjamin'" (41). Even the way Caroline touches Benjy is forceful in this scene—she takes control of the direction of his consciousness and speaks to him as if she could force her chosen identity into him.

Even when the direction of his senses is not being manipulated, Benjy struggles to distinguish between his conscious states. His section ends, importantly, in his ideal state: together with his family, being held by Caddy, with the shapes of the world moving smoothly in their proper order: "Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again. Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell.

And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep” (48). Thus Benjy’s section ends with unity. Unfortunately for Benjy, this unity is a false product of his fragmented consciousness. He ends in the past, not the present from which Caddy is absent. For Benjy, reality is momentarily tolerable and the Compson family is temporarily a community: “I could hear us all and the darkness” (48). Benjy’s perceptual world is perfectly unified, but we as readers are aware of Benjy’s tragic misapprehension of what is real. The section ends, for the interpretive consciousness, with disunity—Benjy’s consciousness follows a fairly predictable pattern and we can piece it together with analytical distance. However, Benjy is afforded no distance—his consciousness is fully immersed in flux, embedded in fragmentation. His attempts to “say” have only dug him deeper into the past. Temporally, we end before we began. Along with Caddy’s absence is a dire lack of vitality. Faulkner gives us pages of a consciousness reacting to its world, but never making something of it. Benjy’s tragedy is not his inability to perceive or to feel, but his inability to create and determine the course of his own existence. Life seems barely tolerable on the individual level for Benjy. Unlike Quentin, he cannot even retreat into a solipsism in which he might attempt to satiate his desires through fantasy. Moreover, because he can never say, Benjy’s experiences are never signified to the community—his voice is never a part of the Compson narrative. Rather, we as readers construct meaning from Benjy’s narrative after the fact. Unity can only be achieved by carefully reading and rereading Benjy’s section to discover the significance of each of his confused attempts to interact with the world.

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## The Permeable Self: Quentin's Vital Failure

Like Benjy, Quentin's self is radically unstable. He is so assaulted by the onslaught of memories, the voices around him and the inexorable progression of history that he cannot find a foothold from which to survey and make sense of his surroundings, let alone himself. Laurence Singal describes Quentin as a hopeless Cavalier, pursuing outmoded Victorian ideals of purity and justice, ideals ill-suited for modernity: "Quentin... finds it impossible to determine who he is. More precisely, he is unable to establish a coherent identity that will allow him to adapt to the historical circumstances in which he has been placed" (116). Unlike Benjy, Quentin has the mental capacity of complex thought. Benjy's is a consciousness of inactivity, whereas Quentin's is one of hyperactivity, schizophrenia. Philip Weinstein describes the pain of Quentin's consciousness as "bedlam": "His mind is a defective transformer through which human voices pass like so many electric charges" (58). Quentin, like Benjy, is immersed temporal flux. He is assaulted by memories and temporal shifts induced by associative senses. Singal continues his analysis of Quentin by claiming that he is "[burdened] with personal roles and values that are no longer viable in the [twentieth century], he can discover no new ones to replace them" (116). I contend that Quentin, confronted time and again with the failure of his antique value system, is not unable to find a new ethics to mimic, but rather refuses to fashion an appropriately modern worldview. Because of Quentin's hyperawareness of the decaying position of the Southern elite to which his family belongs and the chivalric values which seem to be failing him at every turn, his immersion is unfortunately paired with intense anxiety. He is pushed along by the flow of history and assaulted by an unforgiving reality and his only response is to retreat into

himself. We readers are left to watch, as André Bleikasten puts it, “the process through which the entire fabric of a self is unraveled and comes apart” (95). As with Benjy, Faulkner gives us an account of a particular, albeit highly fragmented, consciousness’s experience of the world. Quentin can speak and feel, but his rambling, incoherent, insecure impressions never coalesce into a complete self capable of reconciling his existence in an alienating modern world; thus, Quentin can never act creatively and meaningfully in the world because he is always at odds with it.

We leave the fabricated order of the Benjy section and are introduced for the first time into clock time. Quentin is in bed and he realizes “it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch” (48). From the first moment to the last, the reader bears witness to Quentin’s obsession with his watch, “the mausoleum of all hope and desire”, and his inability to maintain a solid grip on time’s inexorable passage. Perhaps if Quentin were capable of heeding his father’s advice—“I give [the watch] to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it”—he would not be driven to his suicide by his inability to win the battle with time (48). According to Quentin’s father, Jason Sr., we are beings-toward-death who can never extricate ourselves from our own time-bounded mortality. Quentin is tragically incapable of surrendering his battle with time, and when he does listen to his father, he allows his final bit of nihilistic advice to plague him throughout his life. For Jason Sr. “no battle is ever won...They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” (48). In Jason Sr.’s mind, the objective world is a battlefield upon which philosophers and fools hopelessly wage war, searching for

victory—meaning. Perhaps Faulkner has embedded his artistic demons in the Compson patriarch. Faulkner certainly pursues human meaning. Mr. Compson would regard the Faulkner giving his Nobel Prize acceptance speech as a supreme fool: “I believe that man will not merely endure, he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance... The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things” (qtd. in Mukherjee). According to Tutun Mukherjee, Faulkner felt that “he was empowered by his mastery of language to articulate and order human experience, he could influence human behavior” (54).

Mukherjee lauds Faulkner for confronting “the past with its historical burdens, [dealing] with the collective inheritance of sin and guilt, pride and shame, and in so doing [leaving] the world the enduring legacy of an inexhaustible voice” (55). Unfortunately for Quentin, his voice only endures in its proclamation of the unendurable burden of history and loss. Quentin lacks the vital positivity that Faulkner locates in humanity. Earlier I noted Faulkner’s commitment to a morality which must be wrenched free from the impermanence of reality: “What time man can devote to morality, he must take by force from the motion of which he is a part” (Faulkner 253). Quentin fails this test because not only is he incapable of taking anything from the motion of which he is a part, he is also incapable of locating himself in the motion of life. He is entirely subject to the motion of life; he has no free agency. He is the passenger on Jean-Paul Sartre’s automobile racing toward the future but facing backwards, unable to conceive of the present until it is long past. This is indeed the case for Quentin, who thinks, “I don’t suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to a watch or a clock. You don’t have to. You can be oblivious to the

sound for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn't hear" (49). Time passes without our thinking about it. The invention of the clock did not suddenly impose upon humans their mortality. However, especially for Quentin, the mechanized reminder of the passage of a single second of his life can bring flooding into the present all of those instances of time's passing of which he was at that time unaware. Bergsonian *durée* loses its organic vitality for Quentin, who is in constant tension with his own psychological time. When Quentin is immersed in *durée* he is overwhelmed. Sartre misapprehends the purpose of Faulkner's Bergsonian time. He finds the notion that "The present is not; it becomes" a disingenuous denial of human potentiality. He argues that Faulkner, because of his obsession with time, "is sometimes apt to disguise the present, and the present moves along in the shadow, like an underground river, and reappears only when it itself is past" (267). Sartre has spotted the undeniably Bergsonian time in Faulkner's novel, but, because of his overwhelming attention to the Quentin and Benjy sections, asserts that this metaphysics of time is chained to the past. Quentin's consciousness is undeniably backward looking—"Grandfather was always right" (111)—and he lives within the bonds of self-induced determinism, but it would be a mistake to attribute Quentin's inability to become towards the future to the entire novel and Faulkner.

Dipping into the *durée* is the moment of Bergsonian euphoria, but whenever Quentin is exposed to the totality of his experience in the world he finds his family's overwhelmingly negative history. Trying to fall asleep near the end of his section, Quentin is bombarded with memories which have become physical: "As soon as I turned off the light and tried to go to sleep it would begin to come into the room in waves

building and building up until I would have to pant to get any air out of it until I would have to get up and feel my way like when I was a little boy” (110). The air is thick with the substance of his past. As he walks to the hallway he experiences an immediate, unmediated overlap of past and present when he senses “...*the long invisible flowing of the stair-railing where a misstep in the darkness filled with sleeping Mother Father Caddy Jason Maury door I am not afraid only Mother Father Caddy Jason Maury...*” (110). In *durée* Quentin finds his absent sister, whose pregnancy violates the moral code of the values of the chaste southern woman:

*Have there been very many Caddy*

*I don't know too many will you look after Benjy and Father*

*You don't know whose it is then does he know. (73)*

He finds his alcoholic, nihilistic, suicidal father who “*will be dead in a year they say if he doesn't stop drinking and he wont stop he cant stop...*” (79). He finds his incapable and victimized mother who complains in an overwhelming stream of consciousness, “what have I done to have been given children like these Benjamin was punishment enough and now for her to have no more regard for me her own mother I've suffered for her dream and planned and sacrificed I went down into the valley yet never since she opened her eyes has she given me one unselfish thought” (65). He finds his angry brother Jason who stands in as the enforcer of his mother's moral code: “*why must you meddle with me don't you know it wont do any good I thought you'd have left that for Mother and Jason*” (111). And he finds his mentally challenged brother, Faulkner's symbol of the dying, inbred Southern aristocracy, whose inheritance is sacrificed for Quentin's meaningless education: “*We have sold Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard*” (60).

Instead of reacting against this past and taking it as his impetus to grow and participate in modernity, Quentin takes it as his reason to retreat from the world into his own solipsistic yearnings for time's stoppage. Matthews describes Caddy as "a modern girl" attempting to "escape the smothering constraints of Southern Victorian mores. Caddy's flight contrasts with the rigor mortis of her family" (Matthews 40). For, alone in hell with his sister, he would not have to navigate the voices of the world. His subjectivity would be entirely self-determined and immune to the incursion of the moral disappointment of his mother and the morally righteous of Jefferson or the philosophical chiding of his father. In his dream-world Caddy is the static idol of a south long past that Quentin so desires. By projecting his own desires onto Caddy he ossifies her vital modernity and consequently overcomes the subject-object dichotomy by rejecting it outright. In Quentin's suicidal fantasy, he projects his own image of what Caddy should be—he sees in the other himself. Quentin's world breaks down when the world refuses to mirror his desires. Quentin's section is, as Matthews notes, a "jumble of insistence on male domination, female shame, and a code of masculine honor defended by violence [which] gallops in from an antique past" (92). Thus his desire to suppress the heteroglossia of modernity in which female voices are finding the agency to express their own desires is a reach to the past. He does not just want to stop time; he wants to turn the clock back fifty years.

The passage of time bears down on Quentin. Indeed, his consciousness is more aware of time than anything else. Time becomes, in Quentin's phenomenal world, another object with which to contend. The ticking of his pocket watch plagues him. Even when he destroys it he is assailed by clocks throughout town and numerous metronomes,

such as the chirping of crickets or the clapping of horse hooves. Quentin's desire for stasis becomes readily apparent in his obsession with Caddy's virginity and his quixotic attempts to preserve her ideal southern womanhood. As he is walking around Cambridge, Quentin hears the town clock strike the hour and *feels* its insulting force:

It was a while before the last stroke ceased vibrating. It stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister. Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it.

Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. (50-51)

Again the accretive moments of time's passage overwhelm him as every bell that ever rang rings in his ears. Not only does he seek the termination of temporality and with it the burdens of history. He also desires isolation. Alone in hell with Caddy, Quentin would not need to worry about the pressures of southern propriety weighing down upon him. He wants severance from both time and community. He disavows vital humanity in favor of static isolation.

Mr. Compson echoes Kartiganer and Matthews when he deconstructs the meaning of virginity and simultaneously mocks Quentin for not having had sex: "Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you don't know. You cant know and he said Yes" (73-74). Jason Sr. understands the meaningless value placed on a woman's virginity by society. Indeed, he figures it as a

negation of the vital impulse of human life. Purity is negative because it validates not having sex, not propagating the species. This kind of evolutionary logic, while in Mr. Compson's hands is used towards naturalistic, nihilistic ends, inverts a Bergsonian *élan vital*. However, I am primarily concerned with Mr. Compson's espoused belief that "virginity" is just a word, an inherently empty signifier, because Quentin adopts his father's linguistic play and applies it to his own consciousness, indeed his own existence, thus rendering all of his thoughts and actions meaningless. Mr. Compson, though he regularly philosophizes about the meaninglessness of words, seems strongly affected by Caddy's fall from societal grace. He drinks himself into oblivion and his ramblings seem pathetic, drunken attempts to ameliorate the grief of Caddy's loss.

While her transgression should not be considered as such, it *is*. In Caddy's case words do matter, and "virginity" bears enormous weight in the way it makes present Caddy's experience to the community. Such a linguistic construction as "she lost her virginity" signifies to the community defilement, a violation of the symbolic order of Southern propriety; though, for Caddy, such a saying signifies nothing. She is merely expressing her sexuality in such a way that the language of her community is unable to account for. Thus, when she tells Quentin, "*When they touched me I died*" she expresses the failure of language at that moment (94). Her desires are entirely inexpressible—she will never be able to find the words to convey her feelings to Quentin. Indeed, the only way she can communicate her sexual experience to Quentin—and thus engage in a communal phenomenology—is through touch:

put your hand against my throat

she took my hand and held it flat against her throat

now say his name

Dalton Ames

I felt the first surge of blood there it surge in strong accelerating beats

say it again

her face looked off into the trees where the sun slanted and where the bird

say it again

Dalton Ames

her blood surged steadily bearing and beating against my hand (104)

Quentin never does comprehend Caddy's primal response to Ames's name, but Caddy is able to convey the significance of the experience by revealing to Quentin her own phenomenal response to his name. Unfortunately for all involved, signification still falls short. Quentin must still interpret this response for himself, for he does not have direct access to Caddy's conscious rendering of this physiological response. Thus for Quentin and Caddy, achieving a communal phenomenology seems impossible. In Quentin's mind she will always be the fallen woman whose identity was determined the moment she muddied her drawers.

Quentin, continuing his walk through Cambridge while ruminating on his Father's advice, encounters three boys fishing and weaving tall-tales about a legendary catfish that has a twenty-five dollar bounty on its head at a Boston store. Quentin listens passively: "Then they talked about what they would do with twenty-five dollars. They all talked at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words" (75). The cacophony of voices functions here as a microcosm of

Quentin's tormented consciousness. He is filled with the insistent, contradictory voices of his past and he is unable to arrange them in a manageable pattern; instead, they overwhelm him completely. This is the fatal flaw of Quentin's consciousness. Quentin, tormented by his father's advice, allows the incredible power of words to fully determine his reality. Quentin allows the voices of the past, including his father's, to make manifest his identity and his reality. He *becomes* Caddy's shameful affair with Dalton Ames, he becomes his parents failed marriage, and he becomes his father's nihilistic alcoholism. The vital self would be similarly composed, with the necessary condition that it be able to mediate these voices and assimilate them into itself. The vital self exerts its creative will to synthesize the other without losing the self. For Quentin, who fantasizes about a static life in hell with Caddy, reality is composed of an excess of voices, all capable of telling the Truth. Caddy rejects the linguistic determinism Quentin seems to believe in. Quentin asks, "*Why must you marry somebody Caddy,*" to which she responds, "*Do you want me to say it do you think that if I say it it wont be*" (77). Caddy knows what is real; no words can change that. No constructed story can override what is an incontrovertible objective fact. Caddy also reflects on Quentin's desire for static absolutes—anything she says, in Quentin's mind, is necessarily a lie; because what comes out of Caddy's mouth—words of vitality which express an aversion to stasis—will always express desires incomprehensible to Quentin. What Faulkner seems to be striving for, and what is one of Quentin's tragic flaws, is his inability to revel in the impatient and contradictory voices, all the while maintaining a conscious awareness of his own voice. Quentin, to achieve a communal phenomenology, would need to recognize the human significance of

communication—words do matter—but also their fallibility and their necessary inability to express our desires in full.

Donald Kartiganer observes that “[confronted] everywhere with his impotence, Quentin is desperate to believe in the power of words alone: to substitute for what-is the names of what-is-not” (13). He surrenders himself to the interpenetration of others’ voices, allowing them to dictate his future. He gives up his subjectivity, objectifying himself in the gazes of the other and himself.

I used to think that a Southerner had to be always conscious of niggers. I thought that Northerners would expect him to. When I first came East I kept thinking You’ve got to remember to think of them as colored people not niggers, and if it hadn’t happened that I wasn’t thrown with many of them, I’d have wasted a lot of time and trouble before I learned that the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone. That was when I realized that a nigger is not a person so much as form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among. (55)

Here Quentin realizes the necessary performance of blacks around whites, especially in the South. Ironically, although Quentin realizes that “nigger” is not an essential identity, he always identifies people according to *his* perception of their public identity. Indeed, the only character who takes people for what *they* think they are is Caddy, who accepts Benjy’s flaws but nevertheless attempts to communicate with him and indulges Quentin’s ridiculous romantic escapades by allowing him to have his suicidal fantasy with her, knowing he will never cut her throat. Caddy knows that to reject his desires outright

would be to deny his subjectivity. Not only does Quentin fail to acknowledge the complex identities of other people, he also fails to realize his own self's instability. He is himself the aggregation of performances which he thinks he should be making at any given time. Here he recollects his initial feeling that he must constantly perform a Southerner around African Americans so that Northerners would recognize him as such—they would appreciate his filling the role he was designed to fill.

He remains unaware throughout the novel of his futile attempts to perform the southern gentleman. This results in his nightmarish recollections of Caddy and Dalton Ames. He remembers his childish attempts to convince his father that he, not Ames, impregnated Caddy. This memory stutters along and is interrupted three times by the repetitious, "Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames" (51). Here Quentin's entire self is composed of Dalton Ames. His consciousness is so filled up with Dalton Ames that he cannot complete a short memory (here one paragraph) without reciting his name. Indeed, Ames' name invades Quentin's consciousness throughout his section, never giving him a moment's reprieve. This memory becomes more and more frequent as Quentin's section progresses. Dalton Ames and Quentin's desire to be alone in Hell with Caddy erupt more regularly and more unexpectedly as Quentin walks toward his death. The internal logic of Quentin's section becomes absolute chaos and unpredictability as the narrative spirals more and more out of his control<sup>3</sup>.

Early in Quentin's section we are given, through his eyes and thoughts, an image of ideal stasis. Quentin's train, a ubiquitous symbol of modernity in fin-de-siècle

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<sup>3</sup> The internal logic of Benjy's section is much more predictable—the reader learns which words, sights, and smells trigger Benjy's lapses into the past.

literature, passes a black man on a mule and Quentin imagines the scene: “He stood there beside the gaunt rabbit of a mule, the two of them shabby and motionless and unimpatient. The train swung around the curve, the engine puffing short, heavy blasts, and they passed smoothly from sight that way, with that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity” (56). As he does with Caddy, Quentin projects onto this black man an antiquated, Southern, patriarchal, racist image of the patient, satisfied, “happy darkie.” But, what is more, this image is comforting to Quentin. He projects onto another being his own desires for a timeless world. Such objectification not only rejects a communal phenomenology that makes room for the other in the self by making the other the screen on which the self is projected, but it also drains the vitality from a world of dialogic flux. As his train resumes its *progress*, Quentin finds for a moment, just as Benjy does at the end of the novel, a smooth image of order. In this case, order is static and serene, timeless and patient. Indeed, this image is not simply patient; it is “unimpatient.” In Quentin’s consciousness what is good is opposed to impatience, to the embrace of motion. Quentin desires unflux.

But this is all for naught. For Quentin, bound up entirely in his father’s idea that “Man the sum of his climatic experiences...Man the sum of what have you. A problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil: stalemate of dust and desire” (78). Here Jason Sr. reveals the potential flaw in a philosophy of becoming. For if we are an aggregation of experiences and, like Quentin, are composed only of failures and embarrassments, then our lives seem like nothing more than dust and unsatisfied desire. Thus Quentin, whose final act is driven by genuine good will, is accused of molesting the Italian girl whom he was trying to help find her way home. When he learns that the girl’s

brother “aims to charge [him] with meditated criminal assault,” he realizes the absurdity of his existence: “Then I began to laugh” (88). He continues to laugh until “[after] a while the laughter ran out. But my throat wouldn’t quit trying to laugh, like retching after your stomach is empty” (89). Trapped inside a consciousness that perpetually misapprehends and misappropriates the input of the world, his only response to a world he could never understand is nonsensical laughter and disgusted dry heaving. Quentin’s story is at once an absurd farce and a tragic story of necessarily failed subject-making because of a process of ossifying individuation which retreated from its undeniable human existence in a world populated by others with their own desires.

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#### The Other Rejected: Jason’s Ossified Ego

The final Compson brother is the most stable. Faulkner writes in the Appendix that he was the first “sane Compson since before Culloden and (a childless bachelor) hence the last.” The narrator of the Appendix also describes him as “Logical rational contained” (212). However, with this rationality comes a severe lack of compassion. Indeed, Jason Compson is one of the most hateful characters Faulkner ever crafted. However, his bitter hatred put to the side for the moment, his experience is the most ordered to which we are given direct access. His ego is so solid that it is static. Like the ideal moral and temporal stasis Quentin dreams of, Jason’s reality is completely fixed. His moral code is absolute, his worldview is determined, and he is unwilling to change it. Unlike Benjy and Quentin, whose egos are entirely in flux and out of their control, Jason is so “contained,” going about the world on such absolute, unchangeable terms, that he is unwilling to allow the world or the people populating it to penetrate his subjectivity and

change it. André Bleikasten notes the striking similarities in Jason's and Quentin's responses to a hostile world:

They do not fly together, but birds of a feather they surely are.

Throughout, their actions and attitudes reveal startlingly similar patterns.

With both there is a persistent refusal of the Other, an unfailingly hostile response to anything or anyone likely to threaten the closure of their

narcissistic world. Only—and it is here that the differences show—while

Quentin's aggressiveness turns finally against his ego and ends in self-

destruction, Jason's strikes out in sadism. (152)

Jason rejects the inherent heteroglossia of human reality and strikes out violently in order to suppress the voices of those around him. Through Jason's consciousness we find a distinct barrier between the subject and object. The world antagonizes Jason at every turn, and he must fight back. Jason refuses to engage in dialogue with the world, for he feels that communal engagement and understanding might threaten the sanctity of his subjectivity.

“Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say,” begins Jason's section (113). Like her mother Caddy, Quentin will never be anything other than a bitch in Jason's mind. This is, of course, because Jason has it all figured out. Jason's section is mostly composed of his dialogue with other people, and almost every statement he makes is tagged with “I says.” As I have noted, Benjy narrates his section with the pronoun “I,” but it is rarely accompanied by an active verb. When it is, especially when Benjy attempts to speak, he is always *trying to* say. Jason, however, does and says things so often that it suggests he has an uncontrollable urge to act. Indeed, Bleikasten notes that “[for] all its self-

consuming fury, the rhetoric of Jason's monologue points to an eagerness to communicate, a desire to win over his implied audience which has no parallels in Quentin's or Benjy's section" (146). His sarcasm certainly sounds like a bitter attempt to win someone's sympathy, but, perhaps the only person whose sympathy he is trying to earn is his own. Self-reflection would be wasted time. Instead, his consciousness berates itself and the world with rhetorical fury. This absence of reflexivity manifests itself as a lack of creativity and change—Jason's saying is always negative and always the same. He will never say that Quentin is anything other than a bitch. Furthermore, his saying is always in the present tense. He is never ruminating on things he has already said—even in his memories he is saying in the present tense; rather, he is perpetually reiterating the same thoughts and feelings in different situations. We move through fifty pages of narrative and find that the narrative consciousness has not changed in the least. Jason thinks in the final lines of his section, his niece locked back in her room for the final time before her escape: "Like I say once a bitch always a bitch", as if he were speaking directly to the reader as they observe his consciousness (165). He seems to say, "I told you so." Thus Jason reacts to the world as if it were just as solidified as his worldview. No matter the variance in his phenomenal reality, Jason reacts to it the same: with antagonistic disgust and impatience.

Jason's impatience stands in stark opposition to Quentin's lust for the past. He is always chasing time, attempting to do more than he can ever do. This is often conveyed through the language of commoditization—time is for Jason money, and his family is always in the way of his making money. Reacting to one of his mother's regular words of praise with his usual sarcasm, Jason blames the world for his inability to be a "reproach"

to her: “I never had time to be. I never had time to go to Harvard or drink myself into the ground. I had to work. But of course if you want me to follow her around and see what she does, I can quit the store and get a job where I can work at night. Then I can watch her during the day and you can use Ben for the night shift” (114). Jason loathes his family for burdening him with the results of their having wasted time. In Jason’s mind, having time is associated with failure. Being busy becomes, then, at once agonizing and moral. “At least I’m man enough to keep that flour barrel full,” says Jason (130). Jason is anxious that he must run around town, always working to keep the flour barrel full, but he also feels that he is doing the right, or at least necessary, things to maintain his family and to get along in an inhospitable world: “Somebody’s got to hold on to what little we have left, I reckon” (130).

Late in his section Jason hears the town clock strike in a remarkably different tense than does Quentin: “...the clock begun to strike” (157). For Quentin the clock always begins to tick in his consciousness, bringing him out of psychological time and back into chronological time. Jason, however, is embedded in time. Even when it begins to strike in the present, it has already been striking. It started striking in the past. As phenomenology teaches us, our being presupposes our always-already existing in time. It is, then, how we cope with this that gives value to our existence. Olga Vickery writes of Faulkner’s work, “The ultimate relationship between man and time is one that will admit man’s involvement in time while leaving scope for distinctively human dreams and aspirations” (258). He reconciles his ineffectuality in the present by blaming Caddy for all of his failures. In Sartre’s terms, Jason is living in “bad faith” by denying his own freedom of choice and agency in the world. Justin Skirry is quick to note that “Sartre

would criticize this characterization of the future, because we are the source of our own possibilities and therefore of our possible future selves” (40). Quentin and her mother both represent, for Skirry, a liberated vital force moving into the future by breaking the chains of tradition. Thus Jason’s failure is twofold: he fails to actualize his own potentiality as an autonomous self, and he objectifies Quentin and Caddy by attempting to contain *their* “distinctively human dreams and aspirations.”

Jason’s despairing reaction to time’s passage is the same as Quentin’s. However, his actions are quite different. He attempts to rationalize, predict, and order time to an exact pattern. This, however, is futile and we see Jason’s ego-driven futility in his impotent pursuit of Quentin in his section and the final section. Jason’s attempts to control Quentin always fail, and she disavows the stifling patriarchal atmosphere of the Compson house and flees with a circus man, a perfect symbol of transience. He rationalizes this failure by essentializing, in effect ossifying, Quentin’s identity: “Like I say you cant do anything with a woman like that, if she’s got it in her. If it’s in her blood, you cant do anything with her. The only thing you can do is to get rid of her, let her go on and live with her own sort” (146). In order to compensate for his inability to determine absolutely the actions and desires of others, Jason funnels all of his energy into money-making schemes. Jason’s pursuit of capital is, as John Matthews rightly asserts, so strong because “it protests against suicide’s announcement that time is worth nothing” (94). Unfortunately it imposes a value system that, like capitalism, when pushed to the extreme devalues human compassion in favor of capital gains. It is thus that Jason infuses time with an egomaniacal ethic of self-satisfaction and self-reassurance.

Jason's primary pursuit in life is money, which Matthews argues on the surface "seems like a pure attempt to restore the family's depleted wealth" but in reality attempts "to be a writing of his unconscious grief," which is, of course, for the post-structuralist Matthews, a futile task because finance, like language, is a system of arbitrary and differential signification. He goes on to argue that "Jason's language covertly manufactures the sister he never had" (92). This pursues the same psychosexual reading that reduces the entire novel to the three brother's incestuous desire for their sister in which each section becomes the hopeless attempt for each character to reconcile their inability to sleep with Caddy. Not only does this close down the interpretive richness of the text, but it also misrecognizes Faulkner's struggle with the subject-object dichotomy. I contend that Jason was not attempting to express his desire to sleep with Caddy or his grief at her loss through a new language, but rather that all of his expressions and actions are vindictive attempts to assert his agency after what he perceived was Caddy's fundamental denial of said agency.

In Quentin's section we are introduced to Herbert Head, the modern banker who plans to marry Caddy and offends Quentin when he offers him a job and tells him, "there's no future in a hole like this for a young fellow like you" (69). Head urges Quentin to modernize, to abandon the decrepit plantation style and outdated values of the Old South for the job with the bank. Jason, however, desperately wants the job, but everything falls through when Head discovers Caddy's pregnancy and nullifies the marriage. Jason feels that Caddy denied his ability to become an independent man and act in the world by closing off from him a well-paying job and instead saddled him with the burden of supporting the household. He gives primacy to his experience and makes no

consideration for Caddy's loss. Jason remembers an episode after their Father's funeral when Caddy returns to see her daughter. He reprimands his sister for having the nerve to return: "You don't give a dam about anybody", to which Caddy responds, "Oh...that job...I'm sorry about that Jason" (127). At this point Caddy offers, "...if you'll fix it so I can see her a minute I'll give you fifty dollars." They then exchange words, Jason asking to see the money and Caddy begging to see her daughter. Finally Jason agrees to let her see Quentin for one-hundred dollars:

"You'll do it, Jason?" she says. "I wouldn't ask you, if there was any other way."

"You damn right there's no other way," I says. "Sure I'll do it. I said I would, didn't I? Only you'll have to do just like I say now." (128)

Jason takes control of the situation by forcing the action to occur under his terms. Furthermore, he makes sure to verbalize his dominance—"...you'll have to do just like I say." This is a clear reversal of power from their childhood, when Caddy was in control, often making Jason cry and exerting her dominance over him. Just before she climbs the tree—her original and most symbolically powerful act of free will—to look in on her dead grandmother, she tells Jason that he has to "mind me tonight" (25). Not only is Jason communicating his desire, but he is forcing the other to submit to it, to fulfill it with no consideration of their desires. Of course, Jason uses this opportunity to punish Caddy for losing him his job by driving past Caddy with Quentin held to the window, allowing her mother only a momentary glimpse. In this way he invalidates any idea of a communal phenomenology by readily denying the experiences and desires of others in order to exact petty vengeance. In the self-other exchange of thoughts and feelings, Jason

sees in the other both an object capable of satisfying his wants and a subject which poses a threat to their primacy. After crushing Caddy's hopes, Jason narrates his vindication: "And so I counted the money again that night and put it away, and I didn't feel so bad. I says I reckon that'll show you. I reckon you'll know now that you cant beat me out of a job and get away with it" (129). Jason continues saying in his own inner monologue; he continues the verbal battle with Caddy even in her two-fold absence<sup>4</sup>. Further down the page we learn of the full nature of Caddy's betrayal: "I says I reckon you'll think twice before you deprive me of a job that was promised me. I was a kid then. I believed folks when they said they'd do things. I've learned better since. Besides, Like I say I guess I don't need any man's help to get along I can stand on my own feet like I always have" (129-130). He wrongly feels that Caddy denied him a fundamental part of himself (his first narcissistic fault—believing that Caddy's pregnancy, marriage, and shame was of less importance than his potential job) and, as a consequence, grew from a "kid" who trusted people's word (not considering that things and situations change and necessitate new words) to a self-sufficient man who not only does not trust people, but sadistically manipulates them in order to ensure his own independence.

Ironically, though, Jason realizes the fallibility of language and the impossibility of speaking absolute truth and readily violates his oaths and contradicts himself, often in the same statement. Just as Quentin realizes the arbitrary nature of language, Jason's awareness of the imperfection of signification becomes apparent in his understanding and use of money. He thinks, or better, says to himself—for his consciousness is an ongoing

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<sup>4</sup> I make this distinction because this event takes place in the narrative past—Jason is remembering this encounter, and, in the memory, Caddy is not present as Jason counts the money later that night.

process of self-affirmation through one way dialogue—“After all, like I say money has no value; it’s just the way you spend it. It don’t belong to anybody, so why try to hoard it. It just belongs to the man that can get it and keep it” (122). Jason’s contradictory musings suggest what I am contending: that he does not desire the absolute signified, the thing in itself. Or, better, that his contradictions are a necessary game he plays with himself in order to maintain an antagonistic relationship with the world. Donald Kartiganer describes Jason’s split personality in similar terms: “On one hand Jason considers himself an effective operator family head, market speculator, brainy swindler of Caddy and her daughter, a man of keen business sense. On the other hand he nurtures the dream of his victimization, his suffering at the hands of the Compsons, the Gibsons, his boss Early, even the telegraph company” (16). I maintain that however incapable Jason is of recognizing the inefficacy of his actions, he wants to exert his will by any means necessary and that he takes advantage of the process of signification as a means to project himself onto the world. He wants money because it is something he can spend—he can *say* with it. In many cases, he uses money to invalidate the desires of others. In other cases the end seems to be the means in itself. That is, he spends money *on his terms* and nobody else’s—an action of pure free will with total disregard for the consequences. Thus Jason feels threatened by the “dam eastern jews” who “sit up there in New York and trim the sucker gamblers” (120-121), but he elevates himself above the sucker gambler by attempting to manipulate the manipulators: “But hell, they were right there and knew what was going on. And if I wasn’t going to take the advice, what was I paying them ten dollars a month for” (121). Wayne Westbrook calculates Jason’s total losses on the stock market on April 6, 1928, and arrives at this conclusion: “His four-thousand-

dollar loss from a single cotton futures contract makes his other setbacks this day, with the exception of Quentin's theft, look insignificant" (66). Jason is Faulkner's ironic dupe throughout the section, always losing, but it is never the loss of the thing itself that seems to anger Jason, but the loss of agency. Here we learn that, even though he is disgusted by insider trading and the stock market, he nevertheless buys in not only to the market but also the insider trading. However, in his mind, he has taken control of the situation and rigged the game in his favor. Perhaps this self-diluted sense of control is why Westbrook asserts that Jason's loss on the cotton market is the "one loss that oddly does not hit him right in the gut" (67).

His relationship with the Lorraine is equally contractual: he pays her living expenses and she sleeps with him. Further, it is a relationship in which he maintains absolute power. Lorraine's love letter to Jason reads, "Dear daddy wish you were here. No good parties when daddys out of town I miss my sweet daddy." The repetition of "daddy" clearly signifies Jason's dominating role in the relationship, but what is more important is Jason's response to the letter: "I reckon she does. Last time I gave her forty dollars. Gave it to her. I never promise a woman anything nor let her know what I'm going to give her. That's the only way to manage them. Always keep them guessing. If you cant think of any other way to surprise them, give them a bust in the jaw" (122). Even a gift, in Jason's hands, becomes a twisted, chauvinistic power play; a gift becomes a sadistic perversion of communal interaction. Jason uses the gift not as a way to make Lorraine happy, or even as a way to fulfill their contractual sexual relationship, but as a way to exert his autonomy and nullify hers by keeping her guessing. By keeping Lorraine guessing, he shuts down the possibility for her to recognize and assimilate his self into

their shared reality. If Lorraine expected a certain Jason, she could formulate a predictable, manageable identity that she might show compassion toward. Or worse, his identity risks becoming ossified like the stereotypes he applies to Jews and African Americans. Instead, Jason remains a violently unpredictable, unmanageable object who exists entirely of his own accord. Lorraine never knows if she should expect “a bust in the jaw” or a gift. Thus his participation in a communal phenomenology is nullified by his antagonistic refusal to be recognized.

This explains his fear of Dilsey, the only person in his home capable of standing up to him. Recalling Biblical justifications of slavery, Jason attempts to manipulate Dilsey with the Bible by putting “the fear of God” into her: “...as soon as I got home I fixed Dilsey. I told Dilsey she had leprosy and I got the bible and read where a man’s flesh rotted off and I told her that if she ever looking at her or Ben or Quentin they’d catch it to.” Jason justifies this treatment by noting the familiarity Dilsey, whose family has been with the Compsons for generations, has with him and his family: “...I put the fear of God into Dilsey. As much as you can into a nigger, that is. That’s the trouble with nigger servants, when they’ve been with you for a long time they get so full of self importance that they’re not worth a dam. Think they run the whole family” (130). Jason fears Dilsey because she *knows* him and because she knows herself as an autonomous subject with her own free will. Self-importance here translates as self-awareness. Dilsey, whose awareness of all that occurs around her allows her to approach achieving a unified consciousness of self and community (a point which I will detail more fully in the final section), shouts at Jason when he threatens to beat Quentin, “You, Jason!” Quentin cries as Jason restrains her and accuses her of being a “dam little slut,” and Dilsey grabs

Jason's arm and shouts, again, "You, Jason! Aint you shamed of yourself." Finally, Dilsey stands over Quentin saying, "Hit me, den...ef nothing else but hittin somebody wont do you. Hit me", and Jason: "You think I wont?" Dilsey responds lucidly, "I don't put no devilment beyond you" (116-117). Dilsey knows what Jason is capable off and it terrifies him. Furthermore, she knows that the only way Jason can "do" for himself is to act sadistically upon others.

In the final sadistic moment of Jason's narrative, Luster becomes Jason's victim while Dilsey knowingly observes. Luster has been pursuing his lost quarter—the admission fee to a minstrel show—for the entire novel, beginning in the Benjy section, and is so frustrated by the time he arrives at the house for dinner that he cannot help but state over and again, "Ef I jes had a quarter...I could go to dat show." Jason takes up the opportunity to torment Luster: "'That reminds me,' I says. 'I've got a couple of tickets they gave me.' I took them out of my coat." This begins a long exchange in which Jason pretends to bargain with Luster, the outcome of the haggling always determined in Jason's favor:

"You fixin to use um?" Luster says.

"Not me," I says. "I wouldn't go to it for ten dollars."

"Gimme one of um, Mr Jason," he says.

"I'll sell you one," I says. "How about it?"

"I aint go no money," he says.

"That's too bad," I says. I made to go out.

"Gimme one of um, Mr Jason," He says. "You aint gwine to need um bofe."

“Hush yo mouf,” Dilsey says. “Dont you know he aint gwine give nothing away?” (159)

Dilsey understands exactly what Jason is doing. He is taking advantage of his power position and manipulating Luster’s desire to go to the show. She urges Luster to be quiet because she knows Jason never exhibits compassion—he never considers the desires of others; he will never accommodate Luster’s subjectivity into his considerations of his own actions. Once Dilsey picks up on the game—“He jes teasin you. He fixin to use dem tickets hisself”—Jason alters the course of the conversation again in order to maintain his sense of agency, control: “I don’t want them...I came in here to burn them up. But if you want to buy one for a nickel?” (159). Jason is entirely aware that he has no money, as is Dilsey. She condemns Jason for acting like a child, and tells him to drop the ticket in the stove, which he does. This extended moment of dialogue dramatizes Jason’s action-oriented worldview. He could not care any less about the tickets *or* Luster’s money. He wants neither. What he wants is to maintain the inviolability and indomitability of his ego. Such a worldview violates a community-directed phenomenology that accounts for every experience of the world as meaningful and worthy of consideration. While Luster’s desire to go to the circus is seemingly meaningless, to deny him that desire and to manipulate that desire in order to humiliate him is to deny him his subjectivity. Luster becomes the object for Jason’s spite, which is fueled by an originary misapprehension of Caddy’s denial of his agency years ago. What is left now is an exploration of Faulkner’s final attempt to tell the story of the Compson decline: the third person omniscient narrator of the Dilsey section.

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## Failed Omniscience: The Resurrection of Realism

The final section of *The Sound and the Fury* begins on Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection—spiritual resolution. Despite Dilsey’s prophetic Christian eschatology and the fiery sermon of Reverend Shegog, Faulkner’s novel does not end with absolute salvation. Having failed to tell the story three times already, Faulkner pulls the camera out of an individual consciousness and seeks resolution through third-person omniscient narration. “From the concrete particulars of limited individual experience the last section moves toward the universality of the mythic and the archetypal,” notes André Bleikasten. This attempt at an all-encompassing, metaphysical resolution not only fails but rejects the metaphysical principle underpinning the first three sections. As I have shown, the narrative consciousnesses of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, while flawed, are all grounded in immediate experience. They are all living, human, personal responses to the same world. In the final section, Faulkner foregoes rendering the conscious experiences of his characters and describes them from without, thus nullifying the subjectivity of his characters—we are never given direct access to Dilsey’s thoughts, only third-person descriptions of them—by reverting to the realist aesthetic rejected by many modernists for its inability to represent human consciousness. As I have shown in the previous three sections, a communal phenomenology can only be achieved by portraying human consciousness from within. Faulkner’s attempt to narrate human experience from without is his final failure to achieve such a phenomenal experience. Woolf, on the other hand, fashions a third-person narrator that becomes the synthesized voices of all of the novel’s consciousnesses. That is, as I will later show, Woolf constructs an aesthetic by which the dialogic nature of communal experience can be approximated in a single narrative voice.

We will see in *To the Lighthouse* an omniscient narrator that, because of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic of flux, blends together consciousness through immediate juxtaposition at the sentence level. For Faulkner, however, the hard divisions between the first three sections—which sever each narrative consciousness from the others—become apparent in the final section as the narrator jumps from character to character, unable to observe everything at the same time. In this way a realist aesthetic becomes yet more fragmentary than stream of consciousness as Faulkner's entire narrative world becomes populated with static objects tossed about in a violent, unforgiving world.

Bleikasten writes that the aesthetic ambience and shift in perspective “make for a new sense of reality”: “Emerging from the confined, claustrophobic ambience of the three brothers' monologues into the common space of the visible, it is as if after *listening* to voices in the dark, we were suddenly allowed to *see* their owners in broad daylight and to relate each voice to a face and a body” (179). The final section “offers broader contexts but shallower understanding” (Matthews 112). For example, instead of experiencing Benjy's tormented interactions with the world, we are given (perhaps necessary)<sup>5</sup> clarification of his condition: “He watched the spoon as it rose to his mouth. It was as if even eagerness were musclebound in him too, and hunger itself inarticulate, not knowing it is hunger. Luster fed him with skill and detachment. Now and then his attention would return long enough to enable him to feint the spoon and cause Ben to close his mouth upon the empty air...” (172). Whereas in the first section the reader is

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<sup>5</sup> John Matthews observes the potentially relieving conventionality of the final section: “The last section of *The Sound and the Fury* explores the resources of conventional narrative discourse only to learn that they can compose no more authoritative telling of the story than the inside accounts that have gone before. The style, for example, bears much greater resemblance to traditional ones than the styles of the monologues. We welcome syntactic regularity, sequential action, dialogue, and so on” (111).

immersed entirely in Benjy's consciousness—*living* with Benjy the closest approximation that language allows to his experience—in this section we are given the observations of a narrator, who calls Benjy “Ben”, a less personal name than Caddy's affectionate nickname. We are given analytical descriptions of the behaviors of each character that were implied in their own thoughts and actions earlier in the novel.<sup>6</sup> As Jason chases Quentin around Jefferson, he attempts to calm himself by thinking about Lorraine, but his mind always shifts to his loss of agency: “...then he thought of the money again, and that he had been outwitted by a woman, a girl. If he could just believe it was the man who had robbed him. But to have been robbed of that which was to have compensated him for the lost job, which he had acquired through so much effort and risk, by the very symbol of the lost job itself, and worst of all, by a bitch of a girl” (191). Here the narrator momentarily appropriates Jason's language—“a bitch of a girl”—but this explanation of Jason's motivation is far less effective in conveying his rage than by entering his consciousness as Faulkner does in order to show the regular eruptions of disdain towards his sister and the world. It is far more difficult to connect with Jason's personal experiences when a narrator *tells* it in instances such as this: “Of his niece he did not think at all, nor of the arbitrary valuation of the money. Neither of them had had entity or individuality for him for ten years: together they merely symbolized the job in the bank of which he had been deprived before he ever got it” (190). However, when Faulkner *shows* us Jason's experience by forcing us to participate in his thoughts, we feel his deprivation in his own language, and it becomes uncomfortably immediate: “I says I

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Kartiganer reads this as Faulkner's last gasp effort to give us the whole story: “It is the last possibility Faulkner must exhaust in order to make his wasteland of sensibility complete: the traditional fictional method of the removed narrator describing objectively the characters and the events and, without a sense of excessive intrusion, interpreting them for us” (18).

reckon you'll think twice before you deprive me of a job that was promised me...like I say I guess I dont need any man's help to get along I can stand on my own feet like I always have" (130). Thus the final section of *The Sound and the Fury* fails to achieve a wholly communal phenomenology by shifting the narrative focus from personal experience to withdrawn analytical observation.

Furthermore, while the brothers' sections give us the experience of the individual in the world, immersed *in* the flux and attempting to make sense of things, "April Eighth, 1928" begins, much like the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*, with a removed perspective watching an animated and threatening nature assail humanity, confirming the fears of Jason and Quentin:

The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of gray light out of the northeast which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust that, when Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil. (165)

Faulkner replaces fluidity with solidity. We have been introduced into a hard world where a rainy mist does not dissolve upon contact, but rather disintegrates into dust-like particles—it remains solid. Furthermore, these particles are not merely part of the background of experience, the stage upon which life happens. Rather, they are inextricably part of experience. In fact, they are so much a part of existence that Dilsey is consciously aware of their threat. She returns to the house to properly equip herself to contend with nature's onslaught. When she emerges from the house she is attacked by the

needling particles of the outside world. Once she leaves the protective confines of the home space—although, as we have seen, the Compson home is threatened by a kind of subjective antagonism that parallels the violence of the outside world in this scene—she is covered with the world as if it were an oily film. Here, then, in the first paragraph of the final section our omniscient narrator engages in a confusion of metaphors for the objective world. In attempting to report upon what is “real”, the narrator gives an image of a simultaneously rigid substance which can penetrate and assault subjectivity while also coating it in a slippery, oily substance much more akin to Bergsonian fluidity than empirical hardness.

The narrator, struggling with the overwhelming task of describing *everything* for the reader, employs hyper-descriptive language when we finally learn what the pillar of the Compson home looks like:

She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadding skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts, and above that the collapsed face that gave the impression of the bones themselves being outside the flesh, lifted into the driving day with an expression at once fatalistic and of a child’s astonished disappointment, until she turned and entered the house again and closed the door. (165)

Here Faulkner affects a naturalism entirely consumed by the desire for more description. The narrator is forced, because it has no access to Dilsey’s consciousness, to describe her

existence through metaphor. The conflict of subject-object is conveyed in Dilsey's literal deterioration from age. She has shrunk in size; she is now a skeleton "draped loosely in unpadded skin"—antagonistic nature and the unstoppable passage of time have physically worn her away. Yet, from the narrator's mountain of adjectives and analogies, we learn that she, of all the characters in the novel, will be the one to endure because her flesh is merely the façade which she presents to the world, what is inside—"impervious guts"—is her essentially human quality that has withstood the assault of reality for so many years already. Dilsey, read by Olga Vickery as the ethical norm of the novel, is the only character who presents an ethic of human endurance. The world is still antagonistic, as we have seen, for Dilsey, but the way in which she interacts with those around her suggests a commitment to community and compassion that no one else in the novel expresses. Vickery juxtaposes Dilsey with Jason in order to understand her as Faulkner's moral ideal:

It is not only that Dilsey 'survives,' because, for that matter, so does Jason, but that her endurance has strength to suffer without rancor as well as to resist, to accept as well as to protest. She is the only one who challenges his word in the household, who defends the absent Caddy, Miss Quentin, Benjy, and even Luster from his anger. But more important, she challenges the validity and efficacy of his world by a passive and irrational resistance to which he has no counter. That someone should work without pay is so foreign to his system that he is helpless in the face of it. (47)

I concur that Dilsey seems to be the most compassionate of the novel's characters, but the very fact that we never access her consciousness fundamentally undermines our ability to

judge just how it is that she engages reality. Indeed, we only have secondhand knowledge of her subjectivity. We do not know what desires motivate her actions. For, if we were pushed to make a serious judgment of Dilsey's worldview based only on an analysis of her actions as we or the narrator perceive them, the most logical conclusion would be that she is *entirely* self effacing. Not only does she give her entire self to the service of the degenerating Compson family—her desires become in effect the desires of those around her, but she relinquishes her agency to a metaphysical order—what Bleikasten, Matthews, and Kartiganer all concur is a mythical order which brings external meaning to a reality seemingly void of internal significance. Therefore we cannot conclude that Dilsey engages in a communal phenomenology because, by effacing herself completely, her voice, like Quentin's, seems overwhelmed by the desires of everyone but herself.

The narrator, as it is apt to do in this section, employs ironic juxtaposition to describe Dilsey's experience. She is the fatalistic prophet who has “seed de first en de last” but also greets the world with “a child's astonished disappointment” (185, 165). This paradoxical response suggests a deep-seated acknowledgment of the determined status of her historical situation—the Compson family's decline and her position as both spectator and participant as the family's servant—and a disappointment that her world seems devoid of youthful vitality, potential to change—Faulkner's moral imperative. The narrator, in this opening scene, by attempting to arrest the motion of reality so that we may analyze it, has implicated the reader in the denial of a communal phenomenology. We are not privy to Dilsey's experience as *lived experience*—Dilsey's ability to see the first and the last is to see life from an atemporal perspective far removed from lived experience. Rather, she becomes a symbol, a static object, to be interpreted after

observation. Furthermore, we are twice removed from Dilsey's experience because we are left to interpret not her own words about her experience, but rather the narrator's description of, again not even her thoughts, but rather her physical appearance as symbol.

The emphasis throughout this section, by nature of third-person narration and Dilsey's prophetic metaphysics, is on the phenomenal experience of seeing. Dilsey's awareness is so keen that we cannot help but believe everything we are told via her focalization; moreover, her judgments almost always seem to align with the behaviors we observe in the novel's first sections. As Dilsey prepares breakfast, Mrs. Compson begins calling her from the top of the stairs, and "Dilsey raised her face as if her eyes could and did penetrate the walls and ceiling and saw the old woman in her quilted dressing gown at the head of the stairs, calling her name with machinelike regularity" (168). Interestingly Dilsey, like the narrator and reader, even with her powerful penetrating perceptions, can only see the surface of Mrs. Compson. She can only see Mrs. Compson's predictable, machinelike commands and complaints. Indeed, Dilsey misrecognizes Mrs. Compson's desire and tells her to wait for the hot water bottle: "Jes a minute...De water jes dis minute got hot"; but, as we learn from the narrator, it "was not the bottle which Mrs. Compson wanted", and Dilsey must go to the foot of the stairs and engage Mrs. Compson in direct communication, through language (168-169). Much has also been made of Dilsey's mastery of chronological time. As Deland Anderson notes, Dilsey's time is "not obviously determined by the presence or absence of Caddy. Indeed Dilsey is the novel's only major character whose story is not greatly affected, positively or negatively, by Caddy" (315). In Dilsey's kitchen sits another of the novel's broken clocks: "On the wall above a cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamp light and even then evincing an

enigmatic profundity because it had but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound as if it had cleared its throat, struck five times” (171). This clock, unable to signify according to the normal function of a clock, is still profound (Faulkner’s favorite word), it still signifies something, albeit enigmatically. Dilsey reads it accurately and matter-of-factly, “‘Eight oclock,’ Dilsey said” (171). As many critics have noted, Dilsey’s mastery of time, while practically useful—she completes her tasks on time—signifies, as does Quentin’s battle with time, an atemporal understanding of human reality which consequently lacks subjective desire. For, if Dilsey has “seed de beginning” and “de endin,” then what use are desires in a metaphysically determined world?

Seeing takes the place of communication, as each character and the reader are forced to, by way of their own perceptions and interpretations, construct meaning out of the chaotic experience of the final section. All attempts to communicate verbally are a struggle, if not an outright failure. Thus a communal phenomenology, which is predicated upon the ability of all subjects to communicate their desires and acknowledge the desires of others, breaks down. The narrator struggles to attribute meaning the Benjy’s bellowing and whimpering, which the reader, having had direct access to his consciousness, knows are his best attempts to verbalize his desires. Luster, Benjy’s caretaker who by all accounts *knows* what Benjy wants when he bellows, seems unable to comprehend Benjy’s bellowing in this final section, nor can the narrator: “Then Ben wailed again, hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets” (179). Here to narrator outright denies Benjy’s agency, instead attributing any meaning to his bellowing to an instance of cosmic chance. Benjy’s wailing certainly does symbolize

humanity's eternal struggle to communicate and connect, but Benjy's specific lamentations are not to be dismissed as "nothing", "Just sound." The best this narrator can do when trying to assimilate Benjy's voice to his own "objective" rendering of the Compson story is resort to metaphor: "He came obediently, wailing, that slow hoarse sound that ships make, that seems to begin before the sound itself has started, seems to cease before the sound itself has stopped" (179). The narrator suggests the absolute incommunicability of human desires throughout time. That is, Benjy's implacable wailing has always-already begun, desperately trying to find an outlet for his desires; however, the request always ends while the expressed desire lingers in the air hopelessly unsatisfied. But we readers know exactly what it is that Benjy desires—to be communicated with and to have his desires recognized, to feel Caddy's touch and hear her asking, "What is it, Benjy?"

Perhaps nowhere in the novel is Faulkner's attempt to generate a communal phenomenology clearer than Reverend Shegog's sermon. The narrator describes Shegog as an "insignificant looking man" with "a wizened black face like a small, aged monkey." Indeed, the congregation looks at him "with consternation and unbelief when the minister rose and introduced him in rich, rolling tones whose very unctiousness serve to increase the visitor's insignificance" (182). Yet again the narrator attempts to identify an individual based on his appearance with spatial metaphors. However, Shegog's insignificant appearance quickly becomes an unsuitable judgment for his human significance. When he begins sermon, "he [sounds] like a white," which earns him some significance in the eyes of the community before whom he is speaking. However, once he begins his impassioned sermon on "de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!", he affects a dialect:

“They did not mark just when his intonation, his pronunciation, became negroid, they just sat swaying a little in their seats as the voice took them into itself” (184). This mode of speech allows him an even greater degree of connection with his African-American audience.

Most significantly, however, his voice begins to take everyone in the room into itself. He seems to be speaking for the collective here, but his words seem less significant than the loss of self experienced by everyone in attendance, what is said means less than what is signified: the narrative of the persecution and salvation of Christ, whose life parallels the desires of a people recently freed from slavery. When he speaks “...the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words...” (183). *His* voice becomes *the* depersonalized, universalized voice of the community. His sermon triggers a process of absolute communion in which he not only loses himself but causes the churchgoers to lose themselves as well. Eventually, the narrator tells us, even Shegog’s voice disappears—the words in effect become meaningless as a more visceral connection is achieved. In effect, the church becomes the physical space in which a communal phenomenology becomes possible by proximity and a common desire. That is, we can assume that those people losing themselves in the sermon share a common metaphysics which channels their individual desires towards the same end: deliverance from temporal anguish through eternal salvation. Thus Shegog’s sermon nullifies the necessity of language for communicating desire; indeed, his sermon consumes his temporal, embodied self in its proclamations of spiritual salvation: “With his body he seemed to feed the voice that,

succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him” (183). In our vision of a communal phenomenology we have established that it must bring together the diverse individual voices and desires of the community while also maintaining the autonomy and individuality of each voice. Thus Shegog’s sermon, much like Quentin’s unraveling self, enacts a loss of selfhood in favor of a wholly determined temporality in which Dilsey can say “Ise seed de first en de last” (187).

Even if Dilsey can see the beginning and the ending as the temporal boundaries of human life, she cannot see everything that comes between those certain barriers. A universal phenomenology that attempts to see everything will ultimately fail because, within the temporal constraints of our existence, we are relegated to expressing our phenomenal experiences through language. The failure of the third-person narrator to finally instill absolute order on the novel’s inchoate narrative suggests that Faulkner’s metaphysics is equally reluctant to remedy the anguish and flux of human existence with the promise of an ideal world distinctly other from temporal reality and perfectly unified. Once Dilsey exits the church she enters the same inhospitable world that assailed her at the beginning of the section, and she must return to the “square, paintless house with its rotting portico”, which signifies the time boundedness of even the most powerful signifiers of unity and stasis. The Compson’s plantation house, once emblematic of the firmly entrenched white planter class is now an unpainted, rotting signifier fragmented by the passage of time. Furthermore, once Dilsey enters the home she is greeted by the only absolute certainty she knows: the predictable chaos of the Compson house. Mrs. Compson asks Dilsey for her bible, and Dilsey finds it in “the shadows beneath the edge of [the bed]...face down.” She smoothes the pages and sets it on the bed for Caroline,

who nags, “Dont put it there again... That’s where you put it before. Do you want me to have to get out of bed to pick it up?” (187). In the Compson home religion, if not already systematically undermined by the philosophical ramblings of Jason Sr. and the time-bounded experiences of the three brothers, is finally delegitimized by Mrs. Compson’s unwillingness to put forth the effort to find her bible for herself.

Had the novel ended with Dilsey’s Christian vision, perhaps we could argue that Faulkner’s aesthetic and metaphysical resolution was in the ideal eternal. Instead, however, we return to the perpetual flux of reality as Jason chases Quentin in a final farcical display of his desperate desire to exert his free will. Bleikasten observes that “the very order of the episodes tips the balance in Jason’s favor: the chase sequence reestablishes Jason in the leading role, even though it ends in his punishment, and so throws us back into the sordid, hate-filled atmosphere of the third section” (184). Jason reaffirms his bad faith when he tells the sheriff, “I wouldn’t lay my hand on her. The bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead, that killed my father and is shortening my mother’s life every day and made my name a laughing stock in the town. I wont do anything” (189). Clearly we know that Jason will lay a hand on Quentin when he catches her, but he never does. Instead, his monomaniacal pursuit ends in tragic hilarity as communication breaks down in a scene of comic but potentially lethal violence. Jason’s egotism climaxes when he assumes that the carnival worker knows exactly who he is looking for; he asks, without giving any context, “Where are they?”, to which the man replies, “Where’s who?”, and Jason “Dont lie to me” (192). Communication collapses between the two as Jason feels the man is obviously denying him his desire, and the man, offended at being called a liar, attacks him with a hatchet.

Jason retreats to his car which he is ironically unable to drive himself. He unknowingly acknowledges his dependence on others when he hires a black man to drive him home.

Indeed, the novel does end with the recognition of human desires. We are given further confirmation that people *do* know what Benjy wants. Frustrated by his bellowing, Luster, watching the golfers with Benjy, “looked over his shoulder... Then he whispered: ‘Caddy! Beller now. Caddy! Caddy! Caddy!’” (196). Thus, Benjy’s bellowing is not meaningless roaring devoid of humanity. Luster confirms this and maliciously manipulates Benjy’s desires as punishment. Benjy’s voice is not “hopeless” as the narrator tells us. Rather, his situation is hopeless without Caddy. He has no one who will recognize his subjectivity and validate it with positive communication. Jason is equally aware of Benjy’s attempts to communicate his desires, and we witness this when he punishes Luster for driving the wagon in the wrong direction around the town square, causing Benjy to bellow in “horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless” (199). Jason’s reprimand, after striking Luster on the head, is of most interest: “‘Dont you know any better than to take him to the left?’ he said. He reached back and struck Ben, breaking the flower stalk again. ‘Shut up!’ he said. ‘Shut up!’ He jerked Queenie back and jumped down. ‘Get to hell on home with him. If you ever cross that gate with him again, I’ll kill you!’” (199). Jason knows *exactly* why Benjy is bellowing: his fragile phenomenal order has been disturbed. But instead of recognizing and then comforting Benjy for an obviously traumatic experience, Jason denies the individual significance of Benjy’s experience and, therefore, denies a communal phenomenology. Jason’s violent outburst is further insult to Benjy for he strikes him, perverting Caddy’s tender physical responses to Benjy’s desires. Nevertheless Luster corrects his course and resumes the ride in the

proper direction. We end not with meaningless roaring, but serenity as “cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place” (199). Benjy concludes with his own, personal unity of experience. Reality temporarily makes sense for him, but this is, of course, only a façade. Because he lives in a community that refuses to exist as such, unified experience will only be temporary and understanding always fleeting. Indeed, the novel ends where it begins, thus sending us back to the beginning of the novel and forcing us to search once again for a unity that is not there.

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#### History’s Determining System: Faulkner’s Addendum

Marco Abel is correct when he asserts that the “novel is eerily empty of any form of real communion. We as readers are asked to search for the meaning of the novel” (48). This does not, as Abel asserts, betray Faulkner’s nihilistic worldview. Rather, it is quite the opposite. A truly communal phenomenology implicates all participants—reader, author, characters, narrators, etc.—in the existential process of recognizing and communicating the significance of human experiences, both the social and the radically particular. The absence of communion in the novel is ultimately Faulkner’s failure. Because he was unable to construct an aesthetic form which allows for the communion of subjective voices, the reader is limited to one experience at a time. That is, we are able to find meaning in Benjy’s, Quentin’s, and Jason’s individual experiences, but we cannot, by way of their own individual shortcomings and the formal failure of the final section, connect them to one another.

That is not to say, however, that we are looking for ultimate resolution or closure. Benjy's serenity and Quentin's escape, for Matthews, "reflect an aspect of the novelist's desire to establish clarity and stability. But the plot also withholds resolution; Jason returns home delayed but not defeated, and his niece remains at large—the embodiment of the elusive future, her very name the sign of the past's devious capacity to persist" (114). He is certainly correct. However, this does not seem to be Faulkner's denial of language's signifying power (as Matthew's poststructuralist reading suggests), but rather his philosophy of life—a philosophy grounded in an experience of flux. Closure or absolute reconciliation is the antithesis of vitality. Time never stops and past events continue to signify. This is most evident in the Appendix, which Faulkner wrote seventeen years later—signifying his own persistent desire to bring everything together. Faulkner's goal, as Matthew's accurately observes, was clarity and *stability*. He achieves the first by providing masterful internal patterns to each of the brothers' monologues and a recognizable coda in the final section. However, stability is never achieved as each voice—each conscious experience—of the world continues to float about, severed from the rest. It is here that Faulkner's novel becomes hopeless—in his inability to actualize a communal phenomenology.

As I mention above, Faulkner returned to *The Sound and the Fury* in 1946 in order to write an introduction for Malcolm Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner*. Faulkner said of the appendix, "As you will see...this appendix is the key to the whole book; after reading this, any reader will understand all the other sections" (Blotner 475). What he produced was an appendix written as an obituary titled:

COMPSON  
1699-1945

By describing this final addendum as an obituary, Faulkner points to the historical-communal perspective which the appendix takes. Faulkner attempts to encompass the entire experience of Compson history in a very short space and consequently reenacts the shortcoming of the Dilsey section: great context which lacks depth. Thus the community reporter, as the reader might imagine the narrator, traces the history of Jefferson and the Compson family from the reign of Ikkemotubbe, “a dispossessed American king” (203), and Quentin Maclachan, a Scottish rebel who fled to Kentucky in the eighteenth century in order to escape the king’s wrath, to the fates of the Compson’s of the novel proper. In Dilsey’s section we found an ahistorical, atemporal perspective in which the longest view—the metaphysical—witnessed lived events from afar. In the appendix, however, we are given history in the most acute sense. The miniscule lives of the individual Compson’s are swallowed by a family history not only implicated in Scottish exile but also the exile and appropriation of Native American land. Thus, in the Appendix, humanity is consumed by overwhelming history—human vitality is invalidated by historical determinism.

Stacy Burton misreads the intent of Faulkner’s appendix as heavy-handed authorial intervention: “The impetus behind the Appendix, as Faulkner repeatedly explained, was to transform a very complicated dialogic text into a strictly monologic account, to constrain the centrifugal Compson stories...I argue, he writes to institute an authoritative rereading of *The Sound and the Fury*” (614). First we must remember that the authorial will cannot be so easily cast aside in favor of linguistic chaos or infinite signification. Secondly, it is my contention that artistic creation is essential in the

construction of a communal phenomenology in that the artist has a peculiar ability to recognize, construct, and unify human experience in a static art objects. Nevertheless, the authoritative narrator in the appendix, which sounds something like the voice of a community discussing the history and downfall of one of its great families, shuts down the possibility of a communal phenomenology when it could potentially rescue the novel from absolute disunity.

Burton accurately diagnosis the failure of the appendix, but again attributes it to Faulkner's malicious authorial tyranny: "In place of the rich ambiguities of the original novel, in which characters take shape gradually through their own voices and actions juxtaposed with—and remembered through—others, the Appendix offers explicit character definitions that claim the authority of retrospection" (Burton 616). What Faulkner has done in the appendix is shown what happens when the communal voice supersedes the voice of the individual. That is, the narrator in the appendix objectifies the Compson's and contains their entire history—composed of a multitude of subjective experiences impossible to comprehend in such a space and narrative mode—in a rambling, reductive page-long sentence that traces the major events of the novel from the sale of Benjy's pasture to Jason's final sale of the house which was converted into a boarding house, which eventually "had vanished" as well (207). The narrator, whose sentences drive breathlessly towards hopeless inevitability, determines the entire Compson existence by its history. Caddy, who is "Doomed and knew it" (208), and her daughter, "nameless at birth and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex" (214), are condemned in retrospect for the outcomes of their lives. This communal voice obliterates subjectivity by reading history as a wholly

determined process. Free will is replaced by predictable historical outcomes. But, as we learned in the fourth section, seeing from without will always fall short of giving a full account of human experience. Indeed, when Melissa Meek, the Jefferson librarian, takes a picture of Caddy with a Nazi officer to Dilsey for identification. Dilsey, who could see so well in 1928, now laments, “Look at my eyes...How can I see that picture?...My eyes aint any good anymore...I cant see it” (211). Even if this were Faulkner’s authoritative reading of the absolute meaning of the novel, he has reaffirmed here his commitment to the individual’s experience. Seeing Caddy in a frozen picture will never give us access to her experience; we must hear her voice for that, and this judgmental, omniscient narrator will never know anything of Caddy’s experience besides its over-determined reading of her predestined fall from grace.

Thus the Appendix becomes one more voice which fails to participate in a communal phenomenology. Indeed, history’s absolute judgment renders individual voices and desires absolutely meaningless. Donald Kartiganer’s assessment of the original four sections holds true even when considering the Appendix: “Yet the whole of *The Sound and the Fury* does not subscribe to the implications of ending, in terms of either the resolution of action into meaning or the reconciliation of fragments into a controlling system.” Faulkner has yet to achieve unity. So long as the experiences and desires of the individual monologues remain barred from or bar themselves from communal recognition, the novel will remain an aggregation of fragmented experiences never reconciled by a communal phenomenology—not a *controlling* system, but a system through which human experiences are ordered so as to be made sense of against the flux of time and chaos of reality. We never “see demonstrated the ability of the human

imagination to render persuasively the order of things. Instead there is the sense of motion without meaning, of voices in separate rooms talking to no one: the sound and fury that fails to signify” (Kartiganer 21). Unlike Kartiganer, I argue that we see many voices trying desperately to speak to anyone who will listen, but never connecting. We see voices that fail to signify, but not on the individual level; we see voices that fail to recognize the necessity of reconciling their desires with the desires of a communal whole. We do not see the necessary failure of language, but rather individual consciousnesses that are incapable of, fail to acknowledge, and outright reject the necessity of communication to the human experience, no matter how flawed the medium may be. To use Faulkner’s favorite word: *The Sound and the Fury* is profound in its ability to signify the struggle of human communication, but its profound failure is its inability to finally coalesce into even the briefest moment of communion. Now we must (appropriately) step back in time two years to witness Virginia Woolf find unity and make meaning out of the passing and flowing.

## Chapter II

### *To the Lighthouse: Aesthetic Communion*

...the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence then she would have got at the truth of things. (*To the Lighthouse* 147)

Lily Briscoe's thoughts express two essential themes in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). She expresses the traumatic loss of Mrs. Ramsay for the characters in the novel and the reader, both of whom, because her death is bracketed and buried by the onslaught of historical and natural forces, are left to find the significance of her life. Lily's struggle to reconcile Mrs. Ramsay's death through art as it is represented by the unintelligible symbols written across the walls of the house becomes the central tension of the novel's final section. Lily's thoughts here also articulate her aesthetic development, her struggle to complete her painting. *To the Lighthouse* is often read as a modernist *Künstlerroman*<sup>7</sup>, since Lily's growth as an artist directly parallels Woolf's working out of her own aesthetic values. However, while Lily's growth is essential to the novel's progression, especially in the final section "The Lighthouse," her artistic *Bildung* functions as only part of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic whole. That is, Virginia Woolf explicates her own formalist aesthetic values through not only Lily's artistic consciousness but also by entering the imaginative subjectivities of the novel's other characters and by attempting to remove herself from any human consciousness in order to observe objectivity in "Time Passes." This formalist aesthetic ultimately differs significantly from Woolf's Post-Impressionist contemporaries in that it aims for a phenomenological, not transcendental, resolution.

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<sup>7</sup> See Currier and Braendlin

The passage above not only suggests the individual desires of Lily Briscoe, it also points to the phenomenal as well as symbolic importance of language. Lily's thoughts, originally formulated as language, project themselves onto the world and become part of spatial reality. In this way Woolf establishes a communal phenomenology in which both individual consciousness and words themselves have phenomenal reality and significance. The ekphrasis employed by the narrator focalizes the desires of Lily—the visual artist—in the language of the prose artist, thus hinting at Woolf's own desires to write things out and in that *process* reveal the vital truth of things. Woolf's project in *To the Lighthouse* is to put things together, to write the fragments of human experience into an order which, unlike Faulkner's, finds communion in disparate experiences of the world.

Mark Hussey correctly asserts that “Virginia Woolf's art tells us not about an external, objective Reality, but about our *experience* of the world” (xiii). Woolf begs female artists to “think of things in themselves” in *A Room of One's Own*, in which her point is to describe the barrier between female artists and reality due to material conditions determined by historical patriarchy. Yet, for our purposes, her description of reality and the artist's purpose in conveying it is significant. For Woolf, reality is the flux of experience,

something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an

omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. (108)

Notice that reality is not that which is cold and removed from humanity. Rather, it is something “found” by a perceiving agent, it “overwhelms one”, it exists in the human chaos of Piccadilly, and, perhaps most revealing, it exists in “shapes too far away for us to discern.” For Woolf reality is seen. It is not that things do not exist in the absence of humans—we witness this in “Time Passes”—but that things have a peculiar effect on the human experience, indeed they compose it through a process of interaction. Certainly, “[one] of the most salient points she has to make is that the experience of being in the world is different for everyone and is endless, a process of constant creativity” (Hussey xiii). Woolf’s reality is both constitutive of and constituted by human experience. Finally, we see Woolf’s commentary on language—specifically and importantly speech, which is frighteningly unreal because of its entirely temporal nature. That is, as soon as words are spoken they are lost—they exist only in time, not in space. But, as we see Lily Briscoe ruminating, if the artist can put the words in the proper order, language can reveal to the reader that which reality touches, “fixes and makes permanent” (108). “Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality,” writes Woolf, “It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us” (108). Woolf here echoes Bergson when she describes how the writer makes “the world [seem] bared of its cover and given an intenser life” (109). Although Woolf notes the insufficiency of oral speech acts for conveying reality, she submits—both explicitly in Lily Briscoe’s thoughts and implicitly in her aesthetic ontology—the primacy of the textual act of book-writing as something which can momentarily arrest the

daunting but beautiful passing and flowing of reality into something comprehensible and revelatory of often traumatic but nevertheless meaningful human relationships.

As I have mentioned above, *To the Lighthouse* makes evident Woolf's belief in the vital necessity of artistic creation. That is, through aesthetic pursuits, artists can both create and find meaning in a world that threatens to pull humanity apart at every seam, as we witnessed in the hopeless collapse of the Compson family. This is what I shall refer to as her aesthetic ontology—an art form which not only reflects on Being, but which invokes language as an essential, indeed constitutive, element of Being. It seems to be common practice for critics to read *To the Lighthouse* through the lens of specific philosophers, a practice which usually results in forcing the novel into a mould in which it does not fit. Woolf herself notes the trouble with novels concerned only with philosophical didacticism in “The Novels of George Meredith” (1928): “It [philosophy] obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both” (230). I argue that Virginia Woolf's aesthetic philosophy becomes her ontological philosophy in *To the Lighthouse*. Whereas Faulkner was often reluctant to acknowledge influence of any kind, Woolf was both vocal about her influences and closely involved with the development of British modernism through the Bloomsbury group and her close ties with the Post-Impressionists Roger Fry and Clive Bell. I intend to introduce some of the most pertinent philosophical conversations of the modernist period and show that she never commits fully to any one position. Instead, she amalgamates various aspects of each, sometimes combining seemingly incompatible

theories, in order to establish a unique aesthetic-ontology in which art, as one example of the imaginative life, functions to determine and order reality.

Ann Banfield discusses the link between Virginia Woolf's aesthetics and her philosophy in *The Phantom Table* (2000). While Banfield's thesis is similar to mine, her grounding assumption is very different. She argues of *To the Lighthouse* that its "principle of unity... is constructed *ex post facto* via a style and an art. This art grounds itself on a philosophical system, a theory of knowledge" (1). Banfield's statement explicitly grounds Woolf's aesthetic on already-held philosophical beliefs. I contend the opposite—that Woolf's aesthetic determines her philosophical system. Woolf's aesthetic philosophy unifies fragmented subjectivities in order to convey an impression of an obscure, but nevertheless apparent, objective truth. Furthermore, as Woolf completes her artistic "vision"—along with the novel's protagonist, Lily Briscoe—she also envisions a philosophy in which human consciousness, however fragmented its perceptions and relationships with other consciousnesses, can extract some form of meaning or at least understanding from its own experiences and the experiences of others. Thus, as I will show, worldviews as different as Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay's are given equal attention and, through the narrative consciousness and Lily Briscoe, synthesized into a unified voice which draws its knowledge from individual encounters with the world.

As I have noted above, Woolf's formal aesthetic depends upon fragmentation. In *To the Lighthouse*, time, consciousness, relationships, politics, art, and reality are all fragmented. Nothing is presented as absolute, boundaries are constantly in flux, and certainty is impossible. Woolf famously writes in her 1919 essay "Modern Fiction" that "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-

transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (287-8). For Woolf and numerous others, the modern subject experienced a decentered world in which the only unity could be found in a shared sense of alienation, of fragmentation. It would only seem illogical for Woolf to present reality as a coherent and understandable thing after she experienced The Great War; the logic and order imposed by Enlightenment humanism seemed unfounded in a world torn asunder by continent-wide warfare. Nevertheless, I will read *To the Lighthouse* as an artistic attempt to find human meaning and legitimate existence in this shattered world. However, as we saw with *The Sound and the Fury*, the historical conditions in which people live and art is made are the backdrop to experience—an integral part, but not the determining whole of existence. We must pay special attention to Woolf's word choice in this passage: life, not modernity, is a "luminous halo". Modern fiction will not report on a reality any different than that of the past—events still occur just as before, but in the modern world the pace at which they occur increases exponentially as time passes. Thus reality more accurately resembles the blending together of events as represented by the halo or the chaotic movement of Piccadilly, not the clearly ordered and divided instances as represented by an array of gas lamps. According to Woolf, it is the modern artist's duty to evoke life as a luminous, uncircumscribed experience of complex aberrations, not as a predictable, causal system with the alien mode of perfect symmetry employed by linear Victorian narratives. Such absolute symmetry, for Woolf, stultifies the fluid experience of life as change; for if life is fluid, then unity must resemble fluidity. Resolution in *To the*

*Lighthouse* will be in a fluid and transient communal phenomenology which brings together the currents of human experience while simultaneously acknowledging that they will inevitably come apart once again.

In order to understand Woolf's aesthetic of luminous unity, we must look to the blurry canvases of Bloomsbury Post-Impressionism. To conclude, however, that Woolf's aesthetic is merely a novelistic repetition of Post-Impressionism is to dismiss Woolf as a philosopher and aesthetician in her own right. That being said, Bloomsbury aesthetics certainly influenced Woolf's work in some ways. Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibit in 1910 was so influential that Woolf wrote, "on or about December, 1910 human character changed" (*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* 194). The Post-Impressionist movement focused intently on formal exactitude, subjectivity, and a rejection of the mimetic values of Realism. By the time the Bloomsbury men—Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Thoby Stephen, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Leonard Woolf—arrived at Cambridge, G.E. Moore was a fellow of philosophy and had begun to formulate his own analytical, anti-Utilitarian philosophy. His *Principia Ethica* (1903) can be read as the philosophical forerunner to the aesthetic manifestos of Fry and Bell. While Woolf's contact with the Cambridge philosopher was somewhat limited, we know she had great respect for his ethical philosophy; for instance, she writes to Judith Stephen, "I forget—did you ever read the book that made us all so wise and good: *Principia Ethica*?" (400). "Good" and "goodness" are described as irreducible, indefinable concepts in Moore's *Principia Ethica* (6-8). To describe a thing, such as a work of art, as good is to say that the object is "good in itself." Moore delineated two primary sources of ideal states of mind: interpersonal relationships and the appreciation of aesthetically "good" objects.

Here the Bloomsbury men found an ethical justification for making art, and both Bell and Fry further elucidate Moore's philosophy in their discussions of artistic form (McNeillie 12). What's more, we will see that Woolf, by blurring the line between things objectively good in themselves and subjectively good interpersonal relationships, engages the communal phenomenology I am searching for.

According to Andrew McNeillie, "Clive Bell's *Art* (1914), a radical formalist polemic, owes more and acknowledges its debt, to the writings of the Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore and to Roger Fry than it can begin to be said to owe to Pater, or to Wilde" (1). Bell's aesthetic philosophy hinges on his concept of *significant form*. He defines significant form as "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms" that "stir our aesthetic emotions" (8). Lily Briscoe, often read as an autobiographical amalgamation of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, struggles to bring together the various shapes in her painting. Having described the various objects in her painting, she asks herself, "Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?" (147). Here Lily reflects the Post Impressionist's primary concern: unity of form. Bell goes on to proclaim that if a work does not stir one's aesthetic emotions, then surely it cannot be art. He privileges not only the artist but also the viewer. The Post-Impressionistic tenet of subjectivity places the utmost importance on personal experience: "All systems of aesthetics must be based on personal experience—that is to say, they must be subjective" (Bell 10). Bell's aesthetic philosophy, in turn, could not have developed without the influence of Roger Fry.

Roger Fry was equally influenced by G.E. Moore in his time at Cambridge and shared similar views on art as Clive Bell. Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibits shocked the

British public and liberated many artists, including Virginia Woolf, from their hesitations to produce art for a public accustomed to well-entrenched Victorian conventions. Fry placed a similar emphasis on the importance of form and the creation of art for art's sake, but he also found a transcendental power in aesthetic appreciation. He suggests that the artist might be capable of expressing and invoking a sense of pleasure "more fundamental than merely sensual pleasures... which are felt to belong to whatever part of us there may be which is not entirely ephemeral and material" (*Vision and Design* 15). The imaginative life is free from all external conditions. Art is "pure vision abstracted from necessity" (*Vision and Design* 17). Pointing out the contradictions in Fry's Platonic yet subjectivist aesthetic, Christopher Reed writes: "Post-Impressionism was supposed to express the artist's personal emotion, and, at the same time, to communicate a universal mental concept" (50). Woolf, I argue, rejects the notion of universal absolutes. The only glimpse of "divine goodness" we are given comes in "Time Passes", and, even then, this is only a momentary glimpse as the cord is drawn, and the platonic ideal is hidden once again (128). Instead, Woolf displaces the universal with a universalized subjectivity. For Woolf, "pure vision" is always necessarily experiential. The emotion of transcendence only occurs in community—a purely subjective perspective is the indulgent antithesis to Woolf's desire for human connectedness. Unlike Fry, who writes, "I think Art is like religion; I'm not at all sure it isn't the same thing or rather an outcome of the same emotion—the emotion of the universal", Woolf's metaphysics looks not towards universal transcendence for validation, but for spatial and temporal unity amidst the perpetual flux of existence (Fry 389). *To the Lighthouse*, as we will see, begins with the

tragic grasp for the universal, but ends with temporally bounded reconciliation on human, not universal, terms.

Like Faulkner, if not more so, Woolf was overwhelmingly concerned with the problem of the subject-object binary. Her novel enacts the same philosophical battle waged between empirical realists and psychological idealists at the turn of the century. Gottlob Frege, for instance, reacted strongly against the notion of subjectivity: “The confusion of the subjective with the objective, the fact that no clear distinction is ever made between expressions like ‘Moon’ and ‘presentation of the moon,’ all this diffuses such an impenetrable fog that the attempt to achieve clarity becomes hopeless” (qtd. in Levenson 90). Here Frege is commenting on the work of Husserl, who, Michael Levenson notes, drastically shifted his phenomenological theories away from psychologism after Frege’s criticism. A common criticism of many modernist authors is that they had their heads buried in the subjective, ignoring everyday material reality. But to accuse Woolf or Faulkner of solipsistic escapism is a clear misreading which disregards their commitment to creating human dramas about human (material) experiences. Reed describes Bloomsbury’s, and particularly Fry’s, formalist aesthetic as “not just a vague utopian impulse, but a considered attempt to wrest art from the imperatives of capitalist consumerism and the control of the dominant classes served by conventional aesthetic judgment.” Though Reed is commenting on Bloomsbury’s socialist political commitments, his observation is instructive in that it reveals the power of a subjectivist aesthetic such as stream of consciousness to undermine dominant modes of thought and give us philosophical insight: “aesthetic pleasure does not necessarily preclude other forms of commitment” (56).

Levenson notes the early twentieth-century desire to pull away from subjective philosophies: “Husserl’s phenomenology and Moore’s ethics supplied a philosophical justification of the objective character of meaning and value” (93). Levenson traces this strand of antihumanistic philosophy through the development of T.E. Hulme as an artist. In Woolf’s work, as with Hulme, we see Lily Briscoe attempting to disengage herself from her own subjectivity, her own artistic demons, in order to make the seemingly impossible leap from the perception of the objective world to her own rendering of an image. Woolf seems to touch on the same notions of objectivity which Levenson finds in Hulme’s aesthetic, “one which sought to purge the human, the subjective, the mental, the vital, and insisted instead on the independence and objectivity of form, value, and meaning” (102). But classifying Woolf’s aesthetic alongside Hulme’s runs into immediate problems. To say that Woolf dismisses the subjective would be a complete misreading. To understand better notions of subjectivity, it is essential to turn once again to Henri Bergson. Reflecting notions of Bergsonian subjectivity, Woolf jumps in and out of different consciousnesses to convey the fragmented perceptions and thoughts of individual characters, exemplifying the disjointed nature of each of their realities. What is perhaps most Bergsonian in *To the Lighthouse* is the separation of a subjective, psychological time, which exists within each character’s consciousness, from the linear, unrelenting geological time symbolized by the waves crashing against the shore of the Isle of Skye. This divergence of philosophical values between objective realists and psychological idealists, as seen in the competing values of Husserl and Bergson, is mirrored in the aesthetic conflict of *To the Lighthouse*. Most of the novel’s characters attempt creative acts in order to project their own subjective desires into the objective

world, echoing both Bergon's *élan vital* and Fry's imaginative life. Woolf attempts to reconcile the world of the subjective with that of the objective from page one, where James, "cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator...with heavenly bliss," (3) to the final page, when Lily is able to set down her brush in a kind of reserved triumph, having had her vision (209). Thus, especially through Lily's development as an artist, Woolf endows individual experience with objective meaning. Creative actions become a way of making manifest individual desires to the objective world, and, unlike Faulkner, Woolf fashions an aesthetic that refuses to transcend the trauma of existing in a chaotic material world while also giving voice and recognition to every individual consciousness through a free indirect discourse that connects characters not only through plot resolution, but also on the sentence level.

Writing to G.L. Dickinson about the negative reception of her 1931 novel *The Waves*, Woolf asserts, "I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one" (397). Such a self-effacing aesthetic leads Mark Hussey to claim that *The Waves* betrayed Woolf's aesthetic aims (Hussey xx). I agree that Woolf's monistic aesthetic in *The Waves*—her attempt to fashion a singular whole from several voices—runs contrary to the more successful pluralistic aesthetic of *To the Lighthouse*. However, this letter is illustrative of Woolf's desire to make interpersonal connections. I contend that, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf was searching for a mode of representation that brought individuals together "in some vague way" so that they might commiserate and communicate their feelings and desires to one another. Unlike the churchgoers at Reverend Shegog's sermon, Woolf is not attempting,

in *To the Lighthouse*, to wrench her characters from their bodies and render them into a transcendent, otherworldly wholeness. She continues her letter:

...I wanted to give the sense of continuity, instead of which most people say, no you've given the sense of flowing and passing away and that nothing matters. Yet I feel things matter quite immensely. What the significance is, heaven knows I can't guess; but there is significance—that I feel overwhelmingly. Perhaps for me, with my limitations,—I mean lack of reasoning power and so on—all I can do is to make an artistic whole; and leave it at that. But then I'm annoyed to be told that I am nothing but a stringer together of words and words and words. I begin to doubt beautiful words. How one longs sometimes to have done something in the world...

(397)

She makes no pretensions to knowledge of the significance of life itself beyond the feeling of unity, perhaps humanity, that she feels when she creates an artistic whole. There is a fine line in Woolf's aesthetic, as this letter notes, between the continuity of experience and the nihilistic marching on of inexorable time. Furthermore, it might be easiest to accuse Woolf of hopelessness when we look through "The Window" where "things wavered and vanished, waterily" (*To the Lighthouse* 97). However, I hope to show that "beautiful words" do matter "in the world" and that Woolf has achieved a communal phenomenology in *To the Lighthouse* that offers a vision of continuity amidst the fluid, constantly changing, often antagonistic forces of the world, history, and modernity, which, though significant, are bracketed structurally by human experiences—the primary constituent of Woolf's Reality.

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### The Window: Fragmentation and Fleeting Communion

The first pages of the novel introduce us to several characters concerned with manufacturing their own narratives. Mrs. Ramsay constructs a field of maternal protection for the young James, who is consumed with fabricating a joyous fantasy of a trip to the lighthouse in the opening scene. We see Mr. Ramsay retreating inside himself in order to escape domestic limitations, expressed by the recurrence of hedge imagery, so that he might consider the true nature of reality and pursue academic success. William Bankes imagines the present reality of the Ramsay's marriage by calling upon a memory from the past in which Mr. Ramsay courted Mrs. Ramsay: "the hen spread her wings before her chicks; after which Ramsay had married" (21). Most importantly, we are introduced to Lily Briscoe, the amateur artist who is struggling to convert her perceptions of real objects to images on canvas:

She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. (19)

Lily is experiencing more than painter's block. Her inability to express outwardly through painting her inwardly generated image of an external object is a frightening and frustrating experience. Lily's phenomenal world is in order—she is comfortable in her

ability to perceive the things around her, unlike Benjy and Quentin, who are overwhelmed by the flux of their perceptions and memories. She can perceive it all, and, indeed, this gives her a certain degree of control. However, although the objective world is under control for a moment in her consciousness, the moment she attempts to interact with it, she is assailed by “demons.” Lily’s struggle, then, is much like Caddy’s. She must find a way to manifest her desires and experiences in order to exist meaningfully in the world; she will do through painting what Caddy never could with language, and Woolf will parallel Lily’s aesthetic development by fashioning her own aesthetic capable of manifesting individual experiences as a unified, communal form.

The demons lurking in the space between objective and subjective reality plague most of the novel’s characters. Mrs. Ramsay’s perception of the constant beating of the waves exemplifies this lingering uncertainty: “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach... like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life... this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror” (15-16). Beneath the fragile veil of interpersonal relationships and perceived, subjective realities lurks the potential void of nihilism and the unstoppable, finite temporal reality. The narrator regularly reminds us of our time boundedness by calling attention to the crashing waves slowly eroding the coast of the Ramsay’s atemporal island sanctuary—their natural haven to which they flee from the modern chaos of urban life. However, the novel’s primary concern is not to lament humanity’s insignificance in the face of the infinite cosmos. Rather, Woolf, by focusing her narrator’s attention on the human relationships and creative pursuits of her characters, finds value in the “beautiful words” that can fashion

particular human meaning. This aesthetic pursuit is paralleled throughout the novel by characters' interactions with the natural world, which are always imaginative, suffused with *élan vital*. As with Mrs. Ramsay, Nancy experiences nihilistic dread when playing god, exercising her imagination, with the pools of water at the sea-side:

...the two senses of that vastness and this tininess (the pool had diminished again) flowering within it made her feel that she was bound hand and foot and unable to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness. So listening to the waves crouching over the pool, she brooded. (75-76)

Michael Levenson argues that this is an example of Woolf's antagonistic relationship with the "real world": "Then in a second gesture the microuniverse is enlarged until it becomes a counterpart world, one responsive to imaginative will, growing and shrinking as imagination requires, and in this way avoiding the horror of the world's real inassimilable sublime immensity" (173). Nancy is confronted by the vastness of the natural world, the terrifying magnitude of the objective world existing outside of her own consciousness. Woolf dwarfs Nancy's own subjectivity with an indiscriminate and uncaring nature. Nancy's sea-side brooding functions as a microcosm of the impetus for Woolf's aesthetic development. "[The] rest of the universe is for Woolf the enemy of lyric satisfaction," posits Levenson (173). She seems quite aware of the miniscule importance of individual humanity in the grand scheme of things; however, just as Nancy manipulates the minnows in her pools, Woolf is able to resist nihilism through her own imaginative, artistic process, although not without experiencing dread and, at times,

despair. She is not searching for lyrical resolution of absolute truth. Rather, as I noted in my analysis of history in Faulkner, the world is something that is by definition something with which we must contend as beings in the world, but not something that art must resolve.

This power of the imagination becomes even clearer when it is juxtaposed with the certainty of objective reality illustrated in Mr. Ramsay's phenomenological realism. When explaining Mr. Ramsay's philosophy to Lily, Andrew Ramsay tells Lily to "Think of a kitchen table... when you're not there" (23). For Mr. Ramsay, the table undoubtedly exists in the absence of human consciousness. It is a real thing with its own existence. Lily draws upon Mr. Ramsay's phenomenological realism in order to realize her own subjective ontology. She is able to create her own imaginary kitchen table; she is able to conjure "reality" with her imagination. But this imaginative life, as Roger Fry calls it, can only be sustained momentarily:

All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net—danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree, where still hung in effigy the scrubbed kitchen table, symbol of her profound respect for Mr. Ramsay's mind, until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity. (25)

This image of Lily's consciousness puts into action Woolf's description of life as a luminous halo. All of her thoughts and perceptions are bouncing about of their own volition and individuality, yet they are all unified as one conscious experience of the

world. In this way Lily's experience could have been described forty years earlier in Henry James's in "The Art of Fiction" (1884):

Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (559)

In both Woolf's and James' renditions, consciousness is a unifying medium in which the myriad forms of reality are caught and, through imagination, rendered meaningful. Importantly, consciousness is not a static medium, rather it is an "elastic net" or "spider-web" which moves and stretches *with* experience. In this way the conscious mind lives, it expands and contracts in a kind of Bergsonian duration. Nevertheless, Lily's consciousness becomes overwhelmed with the stress of maintaining a purely subjective reality; she cannot sustain a world only of thought, for such a world implies stasis. Pure devotion to thought would deny the existence of an outside world and the vital necessity of interacting with it. Consciousness, in this sense, is very literally consciousness of some *thing*, not just some thought. Thus, Lily's thoughts whirl out of control as she attempts to make sense of them all at once by holding them in her consciousness simultaneously.

Although Lily insists upon a philosophy more subjective than Mr. Ramsay's, one in which she can imagine the table into being even when it is not there, she respects the power and gravity of his thought. Instead of dismissing Mr. Ramsay completely, Woolf

gives him a place and subsumes his objectivity into her own philosophical system. Ann Banfield implicitly rejects Woolf's discovery of an aesthetic of interpersonal unity by aligning Woolf's aesthetic not with Bergson, but with Bertrand Russell, whose abstract logical philosophies parallel Mr. Ramsay's. Russell offers an excellent analysis of Mr. Ramsay's table: "The world of universals, therefore, may also be described as the world of being. The world of being is unchangeable, rigid, exact, delightful to the mathematician, the logician, the builder of metaphysical systems" (*Problems of Philosophy* 100). The table is going nowhere; its existence is so certain that we can imagine its presence even when we are not there. Banfield's comparison of Woolf to Russell is immediately troubled by Russell's own words from the same passage as above: "The world of existence is fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries, without any clear plan or arrangement, but it contains all thoughts and feelings, all the data of sense, and all physical objects, everything that can do either good or harm, everything that makes any difference to the value of *life in the world*" (my emphasis, 100). Thus Banfield implicitly implicates Woolf in the same platonic dualism as Russell. Being is a plane qualitatively different from that of existence, just as the self is a self-contained entity completely divorced from the world in which it exists. In fact, as both Bergson and existential phenomenology tells us and as Woolf's novel bears out, Being and Existence are qualitatively identical.

Banfield, then, must involve Woolf in the same kind of aesthetic coldness we see in the hard lines and sadistic prose of Wyndham Lewis, who argues that in the most desirable realist worldview "*deadness* is essential." Lewis rejects Bergsonian vitalism, which endows the world with motion and life, and instead looks upon the world as cold,

static: “If there is one thing more than another that is essential to provide a ‘sense of reality’—our sheer sensation that there is something *real* there before us—it is the deadness, the stolid thickness and deadness, of nature” (*Time and Western Man* 205-206). Indeed, Banfield diagnoses Woolf with a Hulmean “aesthetic of the impersonal.” She argues that this moment is not for Lily and Mr. Ramsay “an ‘interpersonal’ exchange, but mediated by a thing itself ‘impersonal’—the table, shared object of knowledge” (55). Banfield is half correct in that Woolf acknowledges a shared world in which we experience the same objects and things. However, the way in which we experience those things is ultimately (here I gesture again to Bergson) endowed with inescapable subjectivity. Thus the hard edges of the imagined table are, in Lily’s mind, the effigy of Mr. Ramsay’s philosophy. That is, her attempts to imagine the table when she is not there *is* a shared moment of *personal* knowledge because she associates it with Mr. Ramsay and his struggle for philosophical knowledge. This allows her later in the novel to sympathize directly with Mr. Ramsay when the narrator focalizes Lily and tells us of Mr. Ramsay’s loss of Mrs. Ramsay: “now he had nobody to talk to about that table” (156).

Banfield’s reading renders personal knowledge absolutely unsharable, but her own words leave us room to work: “Any public, shared knowledge is uncertain.” Uncertainty, at least, leaves open the possibility of genuine communication, whereas arguing that Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts’ “inner content remains his alone, private, uncommunicated” makes meaningful human contact impossible (55). As we found with Faulkner, language is a flawed system of differential relationships, but that need not render communication impossible. Faulkner’s struggle was to get his characters’ desires out of themselves. Banfield validates the futility of that struggle by rendering the only

communion in Woolf's novel as coming through impersonal objects—a shared sense of a dead world. However, coldness is absent from the novel, as even the objective world, as we will see in “Time Passes,” is animated.

Indeed, *To the Lighthouse* is not a novel of humanity's conflict with a naturalistic cosmos. Like *The Sound and the Fury*, it is a novel of man's desperate need to connect with others. The outside world, the passage of time, and the events of history threaten to make this impossible, but must be bracketed in order to fashion a communal phenomenology. The novel begins with fragmentation and a denial of individual desires much like what we saw in Faulkner. James, hoping for an adventure to the lighthouse with his father, has his hopes immediately dashed by his father's rational predictions: “But...it won't be fine.” The narrator does not enter James' consciousness directly, but relates to us James' oedipal rage: “Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it” (4). Even as Mrs. Ramsay attempts to console her son and recognize his desire—“But it may be fine—I expect it will be fine”—we learn from the narrator that “[what] he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being...” (4). Mr. Ramsay's commitments are to the world of empirical truths, not people, and, consequently, he enrages his son by invalidating his desires with a projection of his own interpretation of reality, mirroring Jason Compson's unwavering commitment to himself and his own ideas. Communication with Mr. Ramsay is impossible; like Jason he will always shut down the subjective desires of others by proclaiming infallible truth, which is in all reality a prediction no different from Mrs.

Ramsay's ("I expect it will be fine"). When Mr. Ramsay does think of his effect on others, we see a vindictive ego represented metaphorically as a weapon, indicating the real consequences and potential violence of which language is capable: "standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement" (4). Mr. Ramsay is not content with knowing the *truth* of his statement—he must use it in order to maintain his scientifically verifiable position of superiority. Although James and his father could not be more divided at this moment in time, we see, on the second page of the novel, Woolf's use of a narrator not entirely impersonal, but one who becomes the amalgamation of third-person omniscient narrator and the focalized desires of the characters. This sentence begins with a removed analysis: "Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children's breasts...", and ends with a reflection of what could be James' exact thoughts: "...his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was."

Woolf most clearly elucidates the subjective, vital nature of human existence in the dinner scene in which she jumps from consciousness to consciousness, diner to diner. Reflecting Bergsonian imagery of subjective, psychological time, Mrs. Ramsay steps outside of temporal reality and feels a fluid "sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy—there—and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it" (83). She steps out of the stream of linear temporality and observes the disorder of her surroundings: "There was not beauty anywhere... Nothing seemed to have merged" (83). The *things* around

her, outside of her, are disjointed and ugly. The people at the dinner table are not convening in communal unity. Disparate conversations are occurring amongst different, isolated groups. Charles Tansley desperately needs to have his ego satisfied and Lily refuses. Mr. Ramsay becomes upset when Augustus Carmichael asks for a second helping of soup. Things are not going according to Mrs. Ramsay's plan—her desire for a crystallized moment of absolute unity. Michael Whitworth explores Woolf's use of the French philosophy of unanimism to “resolve the choice between isolation and socialization” by “[introducing] the ‘group’: people who experience a sense of intimacy that does not necessarily depend on the usual mechanisms of language of physical proximity” (144). Woolf, in order to bring about order and unity, exerts a kind of unanimistic control by fusing the varied consciousnesses of the diners into a somewhat coherent unit. However, whereas unanimism is grounded on the assumption of a mystical collective unconsciousness, unity does occur through language and proximity; these are all we have for communing with one another—we must find solace in our being together as with Benjy and Caddy or Mrs. Ramsay at the end of her dinner, or in our sharing desires through an always flawed medium, as the narrator of the Dilsey section fails to do and “The Lighthouse” succeeds in doing. Douglas Mao invalidates a purely unanimistic reading and obliterates the mind-body dualism so essential to Banfield's reading of the novel when he compares Woolf's understanding of the body to that of Sartre and Eliot, all three of whom, he argues, note how “the body is of greatest interest as a third thing that can mediate between minds” (53). Mrs. Ramsay conducts an imaginative exercise, domestic as opposed to Lily's artistic one, in which she organizes and directs the seating arrangements and conversation at dinner—she connects people in space by arranging

their bodies. She exerts imaginative control over external chaos, much like Woolf in the writing of her novel.

But let us not forget the fleeting nature of this moment of communion. Though the characters do come together and share something of togetherness, the moment is always fleeting, always committed to its own loss due to the passage of time. As they share the triumph of the Boeuf en Daube, Mrs. Ramsay thinks:

...there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of that flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (105)

By bringing her family together and making for them a shared experience which they would remember forever, Mrs. Ramsay has offered, in her mind, an enduring stay against the passing and flowing of the world outside the window. However, Mrs. Ramsay misapprehends the nature of creation. Endurance is a futile pursuit. The narrator acknowledges this for Mrs. Ramsay moments later when he describes the intersubjectivity of the dinner scene: “It could not last, she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling.” For this one *moment* in time, Mrs. Ramsay need not fret as she does “in active life” when “she would be netting and separating one

thing from another”, indeed spatializing things in order to understand them (106). Instead, a peculiar inversion occurs. This spatial moment of togetherness gives Mrs. Ramsay access to the flux and fluidity of each of her guest’s experience, otherwise denied by the equally fluid external world outside the window. Thus the fluidity of the nonhuman world threatens to pull apart or make impossible those moments of shared experience in which a communal phenomenology might be constructed.

Inevitably, though, these moments must end. Mrs. Ramsay, for whom “[all] must be in order”, refuses this inevitability even after she acknowledges it: “She felt rather inclined just for a moment to stand still after all that chatter, and pick out one particular thing; the thing that mattered; to detach it; separate it off; clean it of all the emotions and odds and ends of things...” (113, 112). Mark Hussey writes that, although “her solitude is broken into by the effort of combining, leaving her depleted and dejected, uncertain of her own being...she must still create, combine, and offer, making matches because she sees potential in the union of two people for something whole and lasting” (51).

Appropriately, Mrs. Ramsay ends the section reading sonnets. The narrator parallels Mr. Ramsay’s endless search for “the whole shape of the thing” of which he “had to keep his judgement in suspense” with Mrs. Ramsay’s love of the sonnet, whose ideal of formal resolution parallels her own: “And then there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet” (121). One might be inclined to validate Mrs. Ramsay’s worldview due to Mr. Ramsay’s spiteful deployment of his own skepticism. However, as I have shown, Mrs. Ramsay acknowledges the futility of sucking the essence from life. Indeed, such an act would be the antithesis of an art which enacts a vital communal

phenomenology which acknowledges life as action and progress. Mao describes Woolf's project, and indeed many modernists' project, as creating art objects not for the sake of the object, but for the sake of production. He describes the turn from "aesthetic experience as end"—Mrs. Ramsay's complete sonnet—to "the work of art as fruit of inspired labor and realization of human aspiration" (38). In Sartrean terms, then, Mrs. Ramsay lives in a state of bad faith similar to Quentin Compson by trying to halt time's passage and encapsulate human experience in a single, static art object. Where we can find aesthetic value and a communal phenomenology that realizes human aspiration and desires is in Lily's doctrine of "art for *the work of art's sake*" (Mao 39). We need a process, not a product.

The enhanced subjectivity conveyed by the stream of consciousness at the dinner table might seem to further magnify the division between the subjective and objective, self and other. In actuality, however, it highlights the possibility of a coming together—the interpenetration of selves. Again, it is the artist both in Lily's consciousness and the narrative consciousness that we access a communal phenomenology. Lily observes the diners and seems to know what they are thinking, what desires are being manifested in their conversation. She speaks to Charles Tansley, momentarily satiating his "burning desire to break into the conversation", and then feels "Mrs. Ramsay's gratitude" (91-92). Here our communal phenomenology becomes clear. Communion is momentarily achieved as Lily acknowledges both Tansley's and Mrs. Ramsay's desires, all while maintaining her own autonomy—she never loses self consciousness. Indeed, it is important to note that this is an experience felt, which can imply in a communal phenomenology closeness as mediated by language or physical proximity. All of this is

made possible by her *being there* and experiencing the other: “For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsay’s, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time; that’s what you feel, was one; that’s what I feel, was the other, and then they fought together in her mind, as now” (102). It is important to note that such an intersubjective conflict is immediately violent. However, Lily’s response is aesthetic: she moves the salt cellar about the table cloth to remind her of how she plans to unite the masses on her painting, how to “avoid that awkward space” (84). Thus the creation of a communal phenomenology is a creative *process*—the continual movement of masses, thoughts, and feelings in order to mediate the potential violence of a conflict of desires.

Ann Banfield again invokes Bertrand Russell when analyzing the dinner scene and Woolf’s treatment of time and being: “Time passes through the series of discrete, arrested moments. For Woolf’s moment is ultimately not simply equivalent to the present” (118). Banfield insists that Woolf does not live in an eternal present, a perpetually forward moving reality. Instead, Banfield sees Woolf’s reality as accretive “moments of being.” Banfield continues, “Certain moments cease being present and become endowed with the permanence of the world of being” (118-119). Mrs. Ramsay realizes the reality of past events by bringing them to life through memory and consequently conceives of a reality outside of herself—a strange overlap of Bergsonian psychologism and Russelian logic. When thinking of her friends in London, Mrs. Ramsay is able to relive the past, stepping outside of time to reimagine reality; after her re-memory, she finds it amazing that reality can exist outside of her consciousness: “For it was extraordinary to think that they had been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more than once all that time” (88). Later, she will rely

on objective stability to balance the chaos of the world. That is, she finds balance between the subjective and the objective: “unconsciously and incongruously, [she] used the branches of the elm trees outside to help her to stabilize her position. Her world was changing: they were still” (113). The most philosophically evocative quality of the dinner scene is the unity Woolf creates by juxtaposing her character’s subjective consciousnesses with an abstract impression of an enigmatic objective reality. A window becomes the frame of a Post-Impressionist painting: “for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily” (97). Here the natural world is outside the human consciousness—existing independently. Its watery and amorphous quality is indicative of the human incapability of perceiving absolute truths. Yet Woolf has conveyed a sense of solace in communion. The fact that the thing made will not endure and that we have no access to the universal forms aspired to by Moore, Russell, or Fry, need not instill nihilistic despair. For, once the Ramsay’s came together, and “all the candles were light up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table,” they change. In fact, they become conscious of their common humanity, their common struggle to find and make meaning with one another and for themselves in a world perpetually in flux. They realize, if only momentarily, a communal phenomenology: “...they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out their” (97). As I showed earlier, however, their common cause never suppresses their own individual desires. The

scene ends and they each go to their individual rooms, pursuing their own individual thoughts. Time moves on and material reality is fleeting, but stability can be found in brief moments of aesthetic unity. Mrs. Ramsay's domestic creativity, Mr. Ramsay's philosophical exploration, Lily Briscoe's painting, and Augustus Carmichael's poetry are all examples of artistry being used to beat back temporal ephemerality and order the pandemonium of reality, but never permanently because time inevitably passes.

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#### Time Passes: What of the World out There?

If "The Window" is Woolf's exploration of subjectivity, then "Time Passes" invokes the indomitable power of the objective world, represented by an all-consuming nature. The narrative no longer roams among the consciousnesses of its characters. Instead, it steps outside of character consciousness (save a few reflections of Mrs. McNab's thoughts) in order to observe the world from the long view. Christine Froula notes how in "Time Passes" the "narrator's new detachment marks the turn from empathy to abstraction" (153). The narrative attempts to step away from Bergsonian duration and gives a glimpse of linear, "scientific" time. Human lives are bracketed, whereas in "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" history is bracketed: the tragic deaths of Andrew, Prue, and Mrs. Ramsay are given only momentary treatment as the inexplicable forces of the universe rage around the empty Ramsay summer home. As nature works to reclaim the Ramsay home, Mrs. McNab futilely struggles to prevent the inevitable: "It was beyond one person's strength to get it straight now" (135). Humanity seems pitted against nature in an unwinnable battle, one which will seemingly end with the house overgrown and the individuals who once populated it dead and forgotten. It is in this section of the novel

where we realize the novel's philosophical dialogism. Woolf actualizes a mostly subjectivist philosophy in the first section of the novel only to turn around and validate Mr. Ramsay's rational empiricism. We learn that human desires are but a speck on the scale of geological time. It also becomes clear in "Time Passes" that there is no universal absolute, no metaphysical answer to Lily's existential question. Although the individual moment will not persist indefinitely, we are rescued from despair by *human* continuity. That is, the novel does not end with nature's reclamation of human creation. Indeed, the form of the novel as a unified whole brackets this rumination on objectivity with human pursuits. Mrs. McNab restores the Ramsay house and life returns. In order to tell the story of a world without a human consciousness, Woolf must fashion, as Banfield notes, an aesthetic capable of describing "the world seen without a self" (108). But, as we will see, the narrative consciousness can never be inhuman, for it is always-already implicated in the human through language, and thus Woolf's quest for an empathetic communal phenomenology runs in the undercurrent of "Time Passes."

Earlier in "The Window," we saw Mrs. Ramsay and Nancy brooding over the empty void which they perceive to be lurking beyond the window. Woolf works quickly to retrieve her narrative from nihilistic dread in "Time Passes." Nothingness is personified, given life as the Virgilian spirits who have come to witness the destruction of the house. As the spirits enter the house, nothingness becomes no longer a void but sentient and active: "Nothing stirred in the drawing-room" (126). The tension created by the double meaning of "nothing stirred" refers literally to the absence of humanity but also to the activity of nothingness. As these spirits of nothingness, representative of the natural world, sweep through the house, they come to the bedrooms, the birthplace of

dreams, signifying contact between the objective and the subjective: “Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is steadfast” (126). The narrator reiterates Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts: the thing that is created or imagined, the dream, offers solace amidst the flow of time and tragedy of history. It is important to note that Woolf imagines the agents of the objective, the external forces of reality, as ethereal and ghostly—they come from the watery, obscure world seen through “The Window.”

Though the world works against humanity in this section, the binary between subject and object is blurred. Prue begins the section by noting, “One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land” (125). As nothingness creeps over the house the narrator observes that “there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, ‘This is he’ or ‘This is she’” (126). Here we are prepared for the obliteration of a dualistic view of the world. Once the rational mind that divides and classifies bodies and minds as a he or a she is removed from the scene, the flux and vitality—characterized as both restorative and destructive—of reality is revealed. The world in which humanity exists is androgynous and amorphous; the land becomes the sea, the body the mind, the male the female. Yet this world is essentially no different than that of the “The Window.” We see what it is that humanity must contend with not in the absence of humanity, but in the presence of a disembodied self attempting to make sense of the absence of any willful human self—we see the immediate *presence* of reality as it is manifested through art, sans the layer of a character’s consciousness; nevertheless, we are in the presence of a consciousness embedded in language and relegated to making manifest this presence through a symbolic structure. Thus, attempting to render artistically the nature of the objective necessarily invokes a communal phenomenology that subsumes descriptions of

that which is outside of language into a linguistic structure—beautiful words are both constituted by and constitutive of human reality. The narrator, throughout “Time Passes,” struggles to hand over the narrative to the “fertility, the insensibility of nature” (138). The Ramsay’s home reaches the breaking point of its endurance and threatens to succumb entirely to the nonhuman:

For now had come that moment, that hesitation when dawn trembles and night pauses, when *if* a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, *would have* turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness... Then the roof *would have* fallen; briars and hemlocks *would have* blotted out path, step, and window; *would have* grown, unequally but lustily over the mound, until some trespasser, losing his way, *could have* told only by a red-hot poker among the nettles, or a scrap of china in the hemlock that here once some one had lived; there had been a house. (my emphases 138-139)

The narrator predicts, much like Mr. Ramsay, the inevitable decay of individual human endeavors in the long view. However, the persistent use of the conditional indicates the narrator’s reluctance to commit to a world without a self. Indeed, even the hypothetical trespasser connects with the humanity before his time by finding the remnants of human creation at the Ramsay home. Thus Woolf’s narrative always points forward in “Time Passes” to the rejoinder of humanity with this world. The narrator is not a static, objective camera watching the house in the family’s absence. Rather, the narrator itself seems to await the return of humanity, to desire the reclamation of the scene by some willful, creative force. Humanity, then, is what will endure; and, offering a compelling parallel to

Dilsey, Mrs. McNab, though the objectified working-class in the narrator's descriptions, literally enacts the symbolic struggle between man and nature. Indeed, Mrs. McNab, to whom we shall momentarily return, enables a communal phenomenology by revealing humanity's immersion in the world. She struggles with the destructive forces of the world while, despite the narrator's condescension, maintaining her own subjective desires.

As noted above, Woolf's aesthetic takes on a mythical and mystical quality in this middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. Graham Parkes notes the animistic spirituality of Woolf's writing in his 1982 essay "Imagining Reality in *To the Lighthouse*." The title is immediately troubling as it suggests the potential nonexistence of the external, although Woolf makes clear that the outside world is something without which phenomenal experiences could not occur. Parkes dismisses Woolf's connection to G.E. Moore as miniscule, a dubious claim considering the relationships Moore had with many of the Bloomsbury men, specifically Woolf's husband Leonard. Parkes argues that "Virginia Woolf's fiction is far from realism because it acknowledges the extent to which we human beings participate in the phenomena of the world" (660). Parkes seems on the right track, but, instead of finding the locus of phenomenological participation in the world in consciousness, he displaces Woolf's notion of agency and desire to an animalistic preconsciousness. He describes the images employed by Woolf to represent her characters' interactions with the world as "pre-cognitive" and "archetypal" rather than subjective. Primal animism, according to Parkes, is a phenomenology in which the individual cannot distinguish the self from the world—there is no clear distinction between subjective and objective. Rather, the individual projects the self onto the object, subsuming it into his own identity. In such a system, as with unanimism, we are given a

vision of reality wholly lacking individuality. Perhaps such a reading is adequate for *The Waves*, but *To the Lighthouse* maintains the autonomy of individual selves and attempts to reconcile their differences communally by making known to the external that which is internal. I should gesture again to Merleau-Ponty, whose understanding of the consciousness as embodied, and thus limited and contained because of that body, can help us overcome Parkes' strange reading of Woolf. All the characters in *To the Lighthouse* are aware of themselves as selves, and, in many cases—Lily, Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay—these characters are self-conscious to the degree that their entire consciousness is devoted to reconciling the division between their own thoughts and desires with those of others. Woolf's communal phenomenology is not a self-serving mode of unreciprocated projection, but rather a continually evolving exchange—or, perhaps better, dialogue—of experiences and desires.

Woolf, suggesting the existence of an immaterial, universal ideal similar to Fry's, personifies the objective, distinguishing it from the individual self:

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. (128)

As with the spirits of nothing, the objective world is personified, even endowed with a personality with its own desires and will. By the nature of flux, truth and beauty are elusive and fragmented but momentarily visible in experience. The artist is capable of perceiving this essence of something distinctly other; however, she is incapable of removing herself absolutely—her subjective consciousness has irrevocably altered the thing perceived. Yet it only “*seems* impossible” that we might “compose from their fragments a perfect whole.” The narrator’s qualified language suggests hope and a desire to continue composing, to make sense of the “littered pieces” of reality shattered by World War I and the eternal passing and flowing of time. The narrator qualifies her optimism by employing mirror imagery: “no image of semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul” (128). The man who looks to the objective world to reflect the nature of his soul will be sorely disappointed. In this light, Parkes’ archetypal animistic images now seem incapable of making reality—the images generated by the “precognitive” soul do not and cannot reflect reality. However, Parkes does provide us with a useful description of the human imagination as it functions in *To the Lighthouse* when he describes it as “the medium of participation between the inner and outer world” (657). The artistic imagination does have the capability of receiving the broken significance of reality and ordering it to some degree of comprehensibility.

Woolf clearly recognizes, by this point in the novel, the impossibility of finding universal meaning, but she refuses to relent in her search for an aesthetic unity of experience that, in the absence of an eternal, metaphysical unifying principle, finds significance in *human* endeavors and experiences in the world. She continues her use of

sea imagery, the sea whose unfathomable depths signify the buried “treasure” of “divine goodness” that is so far removed from humanity, which floats on the relentless waves of the surface. The narrator returns to the anonymous beach-walker: “The mystic, the visionary, walking the beach on a fine night, stirring the puddle, looking at a stone, asking themselves ‘What am I,’ ‘What is this?’ had suddenly an answer vouchsafed them: (they could not say what it was) so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert” (131). While absolute reconciliation of the existential question is never accessible, the visionary—Roger Fry’s mystic artist—is capable of finding a cryptic answer to the question of being. This answer comes not as a solution, but as “comfort in the desert.” The narrator reminds the reader time and again that existence is harsh and unwelcoming, a realization borne out by Woolf’s struggles to reconcile the tragedies of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, though the visionary has had his desires momentarily satiated, he cannot verbalize the answer. As with Faulkner, who struggled time and again to put desires into words, Woolf’s artist becomes a mythical searcher whose function is to go forward and find a way to make connections. For the artist, however, the interaction, the quest, is a mental exercise, not a physical one. The image of the mirror necessarily recurs:

In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules. (132)

It is the urge of humanity to reflect upon a fragmented reality and to channel their perceptions into some kind of understanding. To exist, for Woolf's artist, is to make sense of the chaos of the universe that is "battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself" (135). In order to convey this, however, the narrator must necessarily resort to metaphor. There is no direct line to be drawn between a platonic ideal and art object, nor is meaning to be found in a metaphysical divinity; pursuing such a line of questioning will always result in unsatisfying ambiguity—the universe will always be at war with itself, constantly changing. Rather, in the mirror of man's mind, his consciousness, his experiences of the world, we find the intimations of meaning. The narrator recalls persistently the blurred image of the halo of reality from "Modern Fiction." It is in man's conscious experience of the world in which order can be found, not in questioning what exists beyond consciousness. For, since our consciousness is the irreducible basis of our experiences in the world, to question beyond it is to imply the existence of some metaphysical being beyond that in which we are immersed. That is, Woolf's reality is immanent, not a projection of the self onto the world or the fabrication of some immaterial being. This is most clear, perhaps, in the narrator's recourse to analogy. This is not a world completely without a self; in order to describe the nature of human reality, the narrator must insert a hypothetical self: the mystic visionary walking the beach at night. Indeed, one cannot imagine the world or answer existential questions without an imaginative consciousness that exists, either embodied in a character or as the narrative consciousness telling a story.

Mrs. McNab is introduced to the narrative as the force of humanity. The continuity of human selfhood is embodied in Mrs. McNab as a vital force, *élan vital*. Her

agency is the answer to the narrator's conditional statements of nihilism: "If the feather had fallen, if it had tipped the scale downwards, the whole house would have plunged to the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion. But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting" (139). Woolf's aesthetic elitism and class consciousness are evident here. However, Mrs. McNab's groaning and creaking serve as an adequate representation not only of an embittered working class, but also of the existential angst and exhaustion of a humanity trying to come to terms with itself. Though Mrs. McNab toils in the Ramsay house, the song she sings intimates human hope: "there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope." Immediately juxtaposed with the visionary beach-walker who finally has an answer vouchsafed him is Mrs. McNab's desire for community: "But Mrs. McNab continued to drink and gossip as before" at the public house. It seems even clearer, then, that for Woolf, the warmth in the frost and comort in the desert come from shared experiences in communion. This is where art becomes fundamentally necessary as the ideal mode of connection.

The redemptive qualities of art, or, more basically, human creativity, are realized by the conclusion of "Time Passes." Mrs. McNab begins the chapter helpless and ineffective, but she staves off the advance of nature, if only momentarily, for her existence is bound by her own mortality. In a moment of triumph she "stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them... fetched from oblivion the Waverly novels" (139). She rescues a product of human imagination from the encroaching oblivion—the advance of time. Indeed, the physical

labor of Mrs. McNab, Mrs. Bast, and the latter's son directly parallel Lily's aesthetic pursuits. Indeed, both of their tasks are feminized—as the women restore the house “some rusty laborious birth seemed to be taking place” (139). Just as Lily will acknowledge existence as a necessarily in flux, Mrs. Bast twice says “they'd find it changed” (140, 141), and, finally, just as Lily has her vision, “after days of labour within, of cutting and digging without, dusters were flicked from the windows, the windows were shut to, keys were turned all over the house; the front door was banged; *it was finished*” (my emphasis 141). The work has been done—the process completed. Humanity has fashioned yet another momentary stay against oblivion.

Lily then returns to the rescued house after ten years feeling distraught after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, but she is also moving toward a world-view that accepts a fragmented reality: “Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said—but what mattered if the meaning were plain?” (142). Beauty can be found in unintelligible murmurs; meaning will never be clearly defined and obvious. Having acknowledged both the capabilities and limitations of human subjectivity and the disjointed nature of objective reality, all that is left for Woolf is to propose a mode of bringing the two together—or, rather, she must polish and bring closure to her artistic vision. She will bring some order to the chaos of reality and give existence some meaning. Consciousnesses that previously felt themselves hopelessly isolated and unable to communicate will find reconciliation and understanding. In “The Window,” Woolf realized the fragmentary nature of existence and used “Time Passes” to realize that, as John Dewey reminds us, “[we] confine ourselves to one outstanding fact: the evidence that the world of empirical things includes the

uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and hazardous” (42). For Dewey and Woolf, though this is a traumatic realization, it also enables creativity. Because “change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible,” Woolf’s aesthetic is a way to exist in the world. Because meaning is always fleeting and connections always tenuous, the brief moments of communion which Woolf finds throughout *To the Lighthouse* gain profound significance (Dewey 47).

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### The Lighthouse: Toward Reconciliation

Nothingness predominates in the opening pages of “The Lighthouse.” The chapter begins with Lily asking the existential question, “What does it mean then, what can it all mean?... Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all” (145). The repetition of “nothing” initially signifies nihilism but is then figured only as a failure of artistic expression. It is not that nothingness is the answer to being but, rather, that desires can never be expressed absolutely. The traumatic events of “Time Passes” only magnify the chaos of Lily’s reality; while contemplating her painting she notes that “the link that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off anyhow. How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup” (146). The dissociative force of trauma severs any link between Lily’s consciousness and the objective world. She recognizes the disunity that Woolf embeds in the first two chapters of the novel. Indeed, the narrative threatens to revert to the disunity of consciousness at the beginning of the novel. Nancy, trying to assume the role of caretaker left empty by her mother, asks, “What does one send to the Lighthouse?” What *does* one do without knowing the consequences? How *does* one know what the

lighthouse keeper needs? How is one to know anything? The unknowability of the other's desire infects Lily's consciousness and leads her down a trail of existential thought, thoughts that recur throughout the section: "But this morning everything seemed so extraordinarily queer that a question like Nancy's—What does one send to the Lighthouse?—opened doors in one's mind that went banging and swinging to a fro and made one keep asking, in a stupefied gape, What does one send? What does one do? Why is one sitting here, after all?" (146). Just as each chapter of *To the Lighthouse* is a necessary part to Woolf's aesthetic whole, so does Lily begin to grasp the nature of each part of her painting: "Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? She asked" (147). Clive Bell's influence becomes evident as Lily contemplates artistic formalism as the mode of reconciling the chaos of reality: "The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solutions had come to her; she knew now what she wanted to do" (148). As Cam, James and Mr. Ramsay set out for the lighthouse in order to complete their respective journeys, Lily decides to "paint that picture now" in order to find an answer to her existential question by bringing masses together, finding unity (147).

Roger Fry's aesthetic spirituality can be read in the severity with which Lily regards her painting as something with which "[one] can't waste one's time," for "She hated playing at painting. A brush, the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos—that one should not play with" (150). The painting is not the dependable "thing." We can return to Douglas Mao for instruction—the *process* of making art offers provisional stability. It is with the brush and in the *act* of painting that Lily finds solace. Painting, the analogue to Woolf's writing, manifests to the world individual desires; but

before she can communicate to the world outside of herself, Lily must reconcile her subjective demons by turning inwards. The gravity of the artistic process evokes an out-of-body mysticism: “stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people in the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers—this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her” (158). She withdraws further into her own subjectivity, as she did at the dinner table when she moved the salt cellar in an artistic expression meant to alleviate the disorder of the scene (84). This old “enemy” calls back the artistic demons she battles in “The Window.” Truth and reality are objectified as thing, the same tangible, but fleeting, treasure revealed by divine goodness in “Time Passes.” Lily looks to Augustus Carmichael—the poetic counterpart to Lily’s painter—for guidance, imagining that he would say “how ‘you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (179). Lily wishes that art could stay the unstoppable flow of linear time, which claimed the lives of Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay. Though it cannot create a permanent truth, imaginative creation is, in fact, the only way to instill meaning in a fragmented reality where universal truth is constantly deferred and obfuscated.

Echoing Bergson, Woolf shows how language will always fall short: “Words fluttered sideways and always struck the object inches too low” (178). But it does offer a moment of stability: “In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability” (161). Woolf diverges from Bell and Fry somewhat when she narrates: “One might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it ‘remained for ever’” (179). While formal unity is the ultimate goal of the Post-

Impressionist painter, the aesthetic process—the actual creation of the art, from perception to contemplation to action—is Woolf’s way to rescue one’s lived experience from oblivion. Existence is revealed as becoming, stasis as the antithesis of life, and process as reconciliation. Lily’s revelation is at once liberating and angst-inducing; she begins crying and asks herself, “What was it then? What did it mean? Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the fist grasp? Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle... Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—startling, unexpected, unknown?” (180). Lily realizes the ways of the world will never conform to her wishes—she will be forever poised between desire and its absolute realization. Spurred on by the loss of her guide Mrs. Ramsay, she realizes that this *is* life for everyone. The existential condition is one of perpetual loss and consequent acts of free will to make for oneself a safe haven amidst the chaos. This is perhaps best symbolized by the narrator’s gruesome interjection as Lily laments the loss of Mrs. Ramsay: “[Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]” (180).

Lily’s only recourse at this moment of absolute anguish is to acknowledge her exposure—“She remained a skimpy old maid, holding a paint-brush”—and engage with the oppressive nature of her existence artistically: “She attacked that problem of the hedge” (181). Art is a physical interaction with the world—it is fundamental to existence as Mark Hussey notes: “The ontological importance of writing to Woolf cannot be overestimated: she believed writing to *be* her life” (59). But, never finding absolute solace—never stopping time and experience—history and loss continue to burst into

Lily's present: "But always something—it might be a face, a voice, a paper boy crying *Standard, News*—thrust through, snubbed her, waked her, required and got in the end an effort of attention, so that the vision must be perpetually remade" (181). History is always there—a necessary constituent of existence. We learn here that Lily will never finally put to rest her vision of Mrs. Ramsay and the horror of the war. Instead, she will have to exert her will to perpetually reengage with her memory of Mrs. Ramsay. She will re-perceive and repaint continuously, always experiencing the world anew—for, as Woolf has made clear—time inevitably passes and no force of will can stop it. Lily will never find "some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure" (132). Here I read "domestic life" as experiential life, the realities of people living in the world.

Though she begins the section feeling "cut off from other people, and able only to go on watching, asking, wondering... She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it," Lily looks to those around her for communal unity—she watches, asks, and wonders about the desires and feelings of others (146). Mr. Ramsay, stamping about the island in complete isolation after his wife's death "with his distraught wild gaze," initially torments Lily: "'Alone' she heard him say, 'Perished' she heard him say" (146-147). But Mr. Ramsay's words, perhaps in part due to their melodrama, lose all coherent meaning once he speaks them. That is, the speech act—the projection of his feeling of loneliness to the world—breaks down and loses its intended significance: "the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of

things” (147). Although Mr. Ramsay’s unrelenting egoism is obnoxious and pollutes most of the characters’ consciousnesses, Lily and the narrator realize the necessarily dialogic nature of human communication. It is not only the other’s responsibility to convey their desires, but it is also necessary for the receiver to take the time and consideration to make sense of what has been said. And, here, the narrator becomes Woolf, who, trying to make this “scrawl” have meaning, must lay out the radically particular desires of individuals in such a way as to, even if only asymptotically, get at the truth of things.

Although Mr. Ramsay is painted as an unsympathetic tyrant whose primary desire is to draw sympathy from the women of the novel, his philosophical values offer a polemical counterpoint with which to juxtapose Woolf’s primarily subjective aesthetic ontology. Lily still respects Mr. Ramsay at the end of the novel, and his objective realism remains important to her, and, consequently, Woolf’s, ontological values. She feels that “The kitchen table was something visionary, austere; something bare, hard, not ornamental. There was no colour to it; it was all edges and angles; it was uncompromisingly plain...He must have had his doubts about that table, she supposed; whether the table was a real table...” (155). While Mr. Ramsay’s empirically verifiable table is colorless, without life, and still in question, it is nonetheless visionary in that it implies objective reality—the same reality on display in “Time Passes.” The table offers the same stability offered to Mrs. Ramsay’s by the trees outside the window—an anchor amidst the eternal passing and flowing. While Lily’s painting is the focus of the novel’s aesthetic development, Cam and James exercise imaginative force as they sail towards their own completed visions. If Lily’s *Künstlerroman* comes to a conclusion in *To the*

*Lighthouse*, Cam Ramsay's only begins: "the dark, the slumberous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realized but turning in their darkness, catching here and there, a spark of light" (189). She has just begun the imaginative journey that Lily is completing. James mirrors his sister as he steers the boat towards the lighthouse: "now with a dark shadow, he sought an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape" (185). Both Cam and James enter their imaginations in order to give some stability, some formal significance, to their "dark" realities shattered by trauma. But this is no solipsistic retreat. They connect with those around them on the boat, either verbally or by the mere proximity they share. The trio arrives at the lighthouse with each of them having some degree of satisfaction: Mr. Ramsay springs off the boat "lightly like a young man" as if he were triumphantly saying, "There is no God" (207), James receives validation from his father when Mr. Ramsay says, "Well done!" (206), and Cam finds stability in her relationship with her brother, allowing her imaginative freedom: "Now I can go on thinking whatever I like, and I shan't fall over a precipice or be drowned, for there he is, keeping his eye on me, she thought" (205). This moment is doubly significant in that it reveals the meaning attainable through a communal phenomenology as well as Mr. Ramsay's arrogant inability to fully partake of one. James and Cam come together by realizing the *necessity* of relying on others to support oneself and the equally necessary actions of reciprocation. Mr. Ramsay, on the other hand, ironically exclaims, "There is no God" as if he had conquered the world, though the reader is fully aware of his own neediness. He disavows the necessity of a metaphysical Other which might satisfy his desires but refuses to recognize his own dependence on human sympathy.

Cam finding comfort is in many ways the culmination of Woolf's communal phenomenology. The father-son-daughter trio embark on a journey to the lighthouse and, as the adventure begins to unfold, we are given the impression that individuals will finally realize their absolute fragmentation, the impossibility of communion. The novel threatens, as perhaps *The Waves* does, to dissolve into pure flux—only passing and flowing. Cam dwells on human isolation:

She gazed back over the sea, at the island. But the leaf was losing its sharpness. It was very small; it was very distant. The sea was more important now than the shore. Waves were all round them, tossing and sinking, with a log wallowing down one wave; a gull riding on another. About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sink, and she murmured, dreamily half asleep, how we perished each alone.

(191)

The Ramsays are immersed in the same sea eating away at their island haven, the shore that has represented the unstoppable passage of time throughout the novel. Cam, along with the narrator and Lily, discovers that, indeed, flux will always overcome stability. Furthermore, the use of the word “important” implies a positive valuation of fluidity. Yet, in the narrative present, such an immersion in flux is terrifying. Reality loses its clarity, the distance between human reality and solipsistic anguish grows as the distance between the boat and island grows. As the boat rocks in the fluid uncertainty of the sea, she begins to lose consciousness. In the liminal space between the conscious and unconscious, “the tie between her and James sagged a little. It slackened a little” (165). The absence of consciousness, the loss of self, and even death are undesirable because they require a loss

of interpersonal connections. In this scene the characters once again come together, all seemingly thinking the same thoughts:

...James, with his eye fixed on the sail and on the horizon, steered grimly. But he began to think as he steered that he might escape; he might be quit of it all. They might land somewhere; and be free then. Both of them, looking at each other for a moment, had a sense of escape and exaltation, what with the speed and the change. But the breeze bred in Mr. Ramsay too the same excitement, and, as old Macalister turned to fling his line overboard, he cried aloud.

“We perished,” and then again, “each alone.” (165)

The narrator, by weaving every character's thoughts into one fluid paragraph, evokes a communal phenomenology. Just as James imagines escaping this reality with his sister—much like Quentin imagines escaping with Caddy—everyone becomes caught up on the *same* speed and change. The narrator employs ironic juxtaposition as Macalister exclaims that we all die alone because, in fact, *every* character on the boat has been having that same thought. Human anxiety is a shared sense of despair. The human nature that Woolf describes, then, seems to be a basic longing for connection. The communal phenomenology evokes here a shared sense of isolation, implying a shared sense of absence best represented by the void left by Mrs. Ramsay, the connector. Thus human nature is not irrevocable isolation in one's own subjective world, but rather a shared sense of the same fear of isolation that motivates a coming together. Unfortunately for Mr. Ramsay, much like Jason, this ultimately motivates a different kind of subjectivity: narcissism. Because of his loneliness he needs women to satisfy his ego's desires: “he

imagined how they would soothe him and sympathize with him, and so getting in his dream some reflection of the exquisite pleasure women's sympathy was to him, he sighed..." (166). But Cam sympathizes with him, she has a "private token of [love]" for him and is attracted by "his passion...his remoteness" (169). Unlike her father, who only thinks of his own desires, Cam recognizes and empathizes with her father's intense loneliness. But, like her mother who refuses to deny her own subjectivity in order to satisfy her husband's ego at the conclusion of "The Window," Cam says nothing.

It seems unnecessary that she say anything. Indeed, as we saw earlier, speech acts seem always to fall short. But atop the eternal flowing of the water "a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak" (183). The Ramsays' minds become semitransparent like a luminous halo—connection can be made even without speaking. Immersed to the forever changing, selves are not impermeable, static objects. Rather, they are luminous selves who exchange desires with the world around them. As they approach the lighthouse Cam thinks, "Everything became close to one." The double meaning is significant here as it suggests both individuality and collectivity. Every self, every desire seems to be merging to oneness in a nearly spiritual reconciliation of existential anguish; but, also, one could read this ambiguous thought as maintaining the difference between every *thing* and *one*, the self. Nevertheless, in both readings, communion is achieved—individuals are in close proximity both physically and mentally. This happens as the novel's primary symbol of stasis recurs: "The lighthouse became immovable, and the line of the distant shore became fixed. The sun grew hotter and everybody seemed to come very close together and to feel each other's presence, which they had almost forgotten" (183). James, paralleling every other character in the

novel who searches for a shape to their experience, “sought an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape” (184). But the narrator and James are quick to realize, yet again, the impermanence of such a concrete shape. Even as the family steps onto the shore of the lighthouse’s small island, there is a realization that, even though they have achieved a moment of communion, they will grow apart once again. James asks himself, “So that was the Lighthouse, was it?” The narrator, appropriating James’ question and entering into dialogue with a character’s consciousness, offers an answer: “No, the *other* was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay” (my emphasis 186). Community only exists in realizing its ephemerality. Reality, for Woolf, contracts and expands. As time passes and history interjects, self and other come close and grow apart. Though the lighthouse is blurred and unreal from a distance, life still goes on there—it still exists, much like individuals who, though they seem so far away, still exist and still desire, often the same things as oneself: connection. James reveals the desire for dialogue when he thinks of his father’s selfish love Mrs. Ramsay, and perhaps Mrs. Ramsay’s shortcoming: her willingness to give up herself for others: “She talked to a servant, saying simply whatever came into her head. She alone spoke the truth; to her alone could he speak it. That was the source of her everlasting attraction for him, perhaps; she was a person to whom one could say what came into one’s head” (187).

The significance of the connections between the Ramsays cannot be overemphasized; however, Woolf’s project is ultimately aesthetic and the most lasting image of communal reconciliation comes in Lily’s completion of her painting. Lily, as I have noted, continues to struggle with her artistic demons as she tries to paint her picture.

The primary struggle is manifesting the mental as the physical, making the subjective part of the objective world. As Graham Parkes suggested, her imaginative consciousness is always consumed with making her desires real—expressing them to others so that might know what she feels:

There was something...something she remembered in the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down, and in the mass of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns, which had stayed in her mind; which had tied a knot in her mind so that at odds and ends of time, involuntarily, as she walked along the Brompton Road, as she brushed her hair, she found herself painting that picture, passing her eye over it, and untying the knot in imagination. But there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking her bursh and making the first mark. (157)

Interestingly, every interaction Lily has with her painting blurs the line between intangible mental consciousness and the physical world: “She went on tunneling her way into her picture, into the past” (173). Painting is at once psychological and phenomenological. But the mechanism—human consciousness—seems hopelessly flawed. Echoing Woolf’s letter to G.L. Dickinson, Lily laments that only “Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases.” Lily is unsatisfied with symbolic gestures, for they always seem to miss the mark—they fail to represent desire fully. What Lily wants is “to get hold of...that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.” But reality is never something that is not constituted by human interaction. That is, Lily will never be able to find the thing itself in the absence of her

own consciousness; we discovered this in “Time Passes.” Rather, as Lily goes on to acknowledge, she must encounter reality as a process of becoming, of perpetually reencountering and recommunicating with the world and the other: “Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh...It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on” (193). Human interactions will never amount to the absolute satisfaction of individual desires, yet this is no cause for suicidal despair. Rather, she feels that she must work to make connections—art is “one way of knowing people” (195).

The novel twists and turns through Bergsonian notions of subjective time at Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party, empirical realism with Mr. Ramsay’s exploration of notions of “Subject and object and the nature of reality,” (23), Moore’s ethics as Woolf describes in “Time Passes” an enigmatic, divine, but nevertheless real universal truth, and Bloomsbury aesthetics as seen in Lily’s unrelenting pursuit of formal unity. However, it ultimately arrives at a uniquely *Woolfian* ontology. Woolf’s artistic creation does not pretend to grasp that objective reality, it does not proclaim to expose the nature of universal truth—there is not an epiphany beyond immediate, personal experience: “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (202). To fall in the middle ground is often dull and equivocal; however, Woolf’s ontological philosophy exists between the poles of objective and subjective. Virginia Woolf finds herself existing in an objective world populated by things and people, but those things, tragic and euphoric, evoke within her an ecstatic

sensation that drives her towards imaginative exercise. And, although those things, the table and chair, and the other often seems to exist on a plane fragmented and separate from human subjectivity, Woolf is able to inscribe meaning and order to those things through her writing. We return to Lily's traumatic lamentation: "...the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence then she would have got at the truth of things." Virginia Woolf, by finishing her artistic vision in *To the Lighthouse*, realizes an ontology grounded in aesthetics with which she can write order into and find meaning in existence.

This meaning is ultimately found in Lily's ability, and Woolf's ability through narrative, to connect individual consciousnesses. She begins the section at odds with Mr. Ramsay, but as the section progresses begins to connect with him. Sympathizing that he has "nobody to talk to about that table, or his boots, or his knots," Lily realizes the importance of human connection and offers Mr. Ramsay a moment of satisfaction: "she recalled, there was that sudden revivification, that sudden flare (when she praised his boots), that sudden recovery of vitality and interest in ordinary human things, which too passed and changed..." (156). Indeed, after Mr. Ramsay and his children leave for the Lighthouse, Lily regularly asks, "Where are they now?" As she observes the depths of the sea, Lily is overwhelmed with the impression of a collective humanity: "Into them had spilled so many lives. The Ramsays'; the children's; and all sorts of waifs and strays of things besides. A washerwoman with her basket; a rook; a red-hot poker; the purples and grey-greens of flowers: *some common feeling held the whole*" (my emphasis 192). Lily's desire for connection becomes so strong that she laments the absence of Mr. Ramsay as

she would Mrs. Ramsay's: "And as if she had something she must share, yet could hardly leave her easel, so full her mind was of what she was thinking, of what she was seeing, Lily went past Mr. Carmichael holding her bursh to the edge of the lawn. Where was that boat now? And Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him" (202). Having realized the necessarily communal nature of human experience, Lily is able to turn back to her canvas and realize "its attempt at something"—its search for formal unity. It does not matter that it "would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed" (208). Rather, what matters is that she finally finds a moment of connection—"With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre"—between the masses on her canvas. The novel which began with tenuous fluidity does not end with final reconciliation. Instead, Lily herself actuates a vital, communal phenomenology by unifying the fragments only for "a second." The novel ends with the implication of forward progress; Lily has "had" her vision, and will necessarily go on having them in order to make connections in a world always threatening to obliterate moments of communion—being.

## Conclusion

As I have shown in the preceding pages, both Woolf and Faulkner work desperately against the apparent impossibility of making connections outside one's own subjectivity. Their novels struggle to find meaning by locating individuals within communities which by necessity form and connect through language, which we have acknowledged as fundamentally incapable of signifying absolute meaning. As artistic acts which are fueled by and evocative of vitality, the novels evoke this communal phenomenology in both content and form. That is, beautiful phrases and words offer aesthetic reconciliation of not only modern alienation, but the angst of the human existential condition. Although *The Sound and the Fury* moves toward such a reconciliation and seems to desire community, Faulkner's struggle to unite individual consciousnesses into a coherent whole ultimately ends in failure as Benjy rides around Jefferson, the reader expecting another outburst of infuriated bellowing. Woolf, however, presents a world in which the individual, possessor of an imaginative consciousness, is able to come to terms with her own existence in the world *and* the existence of others with their own, often markedly different, even conflicting desires.

For Woolf and Faulkner the world is constituted by forces mostly out of human control. In the wake of the First World War and the rapid transformation of early twentieth-century culture, both authors witnessed what could only have felt like a rupture in the fabric of Western history. However, they do not turn away from the forces of history or time, but instead realize a pragmatic acceptance of the nature of reality—an often traumatic, chaotic mess of entangled human desires and aspirations. That is, the world for Woolf and Faulkner is not a subjective plane upon which we each wander,

alone. It is the shared ground of experience. Thus Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, Quentin Compson and Shreve MacKenzie populate the same world and experience the same things. But it is the way in which they experience those things—their phenomenal experience of the world—through which subjectivity arises. Therefore the alienation so often discussed in modernist literature is, for Woolf and Faulker, *not* the result of the fragmentation of the objective world. Like John Dewey, both authors seem to have come to a pragmatic understanding that the “world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable” (41). No force of humanity can alter this fact. Angst arises in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Sound and the Fury* from the characters’ desperate struggles to connect with one another. The worlds of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner are populated with characters who seem irrevocably isolated *from one another*. Though they share *the same world*, these individual consciousnesses often fail to connect with their existential companions, thus existence is under the constant threat of being rendered meaningless by the potential futility of having one’s desires understood by the other. Fragmentation, then, is the division of selves which the modern artist must struggle to reunite; because of the chaotic nature of reality, aesthetic creation gains its meaning: “Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellencies; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible” (Dewey 47).

Both authors’ aesthetics, as we found in their own descriptions of the artistic process and its deployment in the novels, propose a mode for living in a world of fragmented selves. Characters exist as fundamentally isolated subjectivities, but Woolf and Faulkner are distraught by such a predicament and work feverishly to connect their

characters meaningfully with one another. In this way art becomes an essential act of the human will. Amidst the whirling chaos of the modern world as well as in the intimate but threateningly tenuous moments between individual consciousnesses, aesthetic creation offers an outlet through which human desires can come together in a collective expression of human, not metaphysical, meaning. The fiction of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf expands the scope of Fredric Jameson's oft-cited claim—"History is what hurts. It is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis" (88)—to the existential problem itself. Though history and the inevitable fact of human mortality limit the scope and efficacy of human desires and actions, art offers a brief stay against the permanent onrush of experience. In order to do this, art objects must be predicated upon an aesthetic which springs forth from human experience. That is, art must be grounded on consciousness as the irreducible basis of our encounters with reality. Thus phenomenology offers the ideal philosophical inroad to such an aesthetic, and, indeed, if art is to be a shared experience in which artist and audience realize the plurality of experiences of the world, it must evoke a communal phenomenology—a search for unity as opposed to irreconcilable fragmentation.

This presents a vision of art and the world in which humanity need not despair at the condition of its own existence nor throw caution to the wind and embrace such amorphous concepts as "play." For what a communal phenomenology acknowledges is that experience occurs on both an individual and collective scale. What constitutes reality is not simply one's own experience of the world, but one's own dialogue and engagement with others. And, as the world in which we all live becomes more complex and more inhospitable with the ever-accelerating process of modernization, voices become lost

amidst the din of modernity. To reiterate and expand on Marshall Berman and Susan Stanford Friedman, modernity is a “shared landscape of encounter.” If modernity is that which characterizes our reality, then it is that which characterizes all of our realities and as such something with which we all must contend. It is to this predicament, then, that I hope my understanding of an aesthetic which evokes a communal phenomenology can be applied.

Postmodernism in the most general sense of the term claims that the pursuit of knowledge or connections is fundamentally misguided because of the futility of all modes of interpersonal engagement. As we saw with John Matthews’s reading of Faulkner, since language is an arbitrary and differential system of significance and since, as Derrida tells us, we are always-already embedded in language, we have no recourse to a truly meaningful mode of discourse. While postmodernism as a movement makes pretensions to absolute freedom and individuality, it ultimately shuts down the possibility of escaping one’s own subjectivity in order to make intersubjective connections in the world. That is, unlike Woolf and Faulkner, postmodernism embraces fragmentation as not only a necessary quality of existence, but an ideal. Furthermore, the linguistic turn and postmodernism’s displacement of experience to the realm of language has the potential consequence of invalidating actual, embodied lived experiences. By emphasizing Woolf’s and Faulkner’s attempts to reunite fragments, to make connections *and* by deploying phenomenology to do so, I contend that a theory might be fashioned which recognizes both lived experiences and linguistic utterances as essential constituents of human reality.

I hope that by elucidating Faulkner's attempt to evoke a communal phenomenology and Woolf's successful deployment of one, that I have enabled the development of a theory of art that finds in creative production the potential for dialogue and human connection. I envision a theoretical practice grounded on Woolf's and Faulkner's belief that, although in the modern world all that is solid seems to melt into air, aesthetic endeavors can momentarily bracket modernity and reflect on the radically particular experiences of individual subjects to make a home not only for oneself but for one's community in the world.

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## **Vita**

Phil Bandy was born and grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He completed his B.A. and M.A. in English Literature at the University of Tennessee. He began pursuing his Ph.D. in the same field at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 2012.