

Mr. Bankes's Telephone & Lily Briscoe's X-ray Vision

Technological devices as literary devices in Virginia Woolf

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To Zhou Yi and Feng Hui

for the many beginnings

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ABSTRACT

Technological devices and metaphors have been embedded in Virginia Woolf's writing since early in her career; they form a recurring motif that runs through her novels, essays, and personal writing. Though critical analysis of her work has usually taken a philosophical, psychological, or phenomenological approach, recent critics have re-evaluated the impact of twentieth century technologies on the aesthetic approach of modernist writers, Woolf in particular. This project will take that scholarship as a basis and examine how technological devices mediate relationships in the private and public worlds of Virginia Woolf. The texts that I will consider include the novels *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Waves*, the essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, as well as her diaries, letters, and the incomplete memoir "A Sketch of the Past." The continuum of private to public writings spanned by these texts, the years they cover in Woolf's career and the consistent thread of technological devices that runs through them demonstrate the extent to which technology permeated Woolf's thinking. Woolf's technological devices link and unify characters in personal relationships or as a social body. The limitations inherent in these devices also reflect the limits and the tenuousness of human relationships.

In the introduction I will give a brief history of how I came to relate Virginia Woolf with science and technology. It will then offer a critical background of studies involving Woolf and modern science in order to contextualize this project and to suggest a point of departure.

In chapter one I examine how Woolf employs technological devices as literary devices to overcome obstacles to understanding and create a fiction of unity between separate characters. This crafted unity is central to Woolf's idea of freedom of the mind and is implicated in her meditations on art, feminism, and war. Though the ultimate unity between persons, eras, and perspectives may prove impossible, the redeeming movement of the imagination creates a necessary fiction to hold discontinuous parts together.

In chapter two, technological devices tether different perspectives to form pluralities. Woolf uses devices of modern transportation to show that the fundamental element in all human relations is one's awareness of being alive at the same time and in the same space as others. Emerging from that is an understanding of the tenuousness that pervades all relationships, and a delight in the brief loss of ego that accompanies connection. Most relationships can be derived from the brief illusory tethering in which one is liberated from one's own body and mind.

Though Woolf never commented explicitly on science and technology, the coherent patterns that emerge from examining how technological devices operate in her writing suggests that she had great sensitivity to the imaginative possibilities these technologies provide. Literature speaks back to science: with the devices of technology, Woolf's fiction redefines the relation of the mind to reality and refigures the boundaries of the individual.

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SHORT TITLES

Parenthetical citations use the abbreviations below and refer to the following works by Virginia

Woolf:

- CE:4* *Collected Essays, Volume IV* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967)
- MB* *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985)
- MD* *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 2002)
- TG* *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966)
- TTL* *To the Lighthouse* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 2005)
- TY* *The Years* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 2008)

INTRODUCTION

THE (SCIENCE) FICTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

It was a question, [Lily] remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken.¹

- *To the Lighthouse*

Science fiction introduced me to Virginia Woolf. I began with Ursula K. LeGuin, who is a well-regarded science fiction author whose most famous book, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is a story of alien encounters and interstellar travel. LeGuin cited Woolf as an inspiration,² thus my encounter with Woolf's writing came by the somewhat logical progression from my favorite science fiction author to *her* favorite author. Because of this trajectory of encounter, Virginia Woolf was, from the very beginning, linked to the idea of science in my mind.

Virginia Woolf concludes her most famous polemic, *A Room of One's Own*, with the image of a "girl in patent leather boots" and a "young man in a maroon overcoat" stepping into a taxi together.³ For the narrator, the sight reunites the genders of the mind; from it she concludes that the creative mind is androgynous in that it contains both a straightforward, masculine vigor, and an expansive and generative feminine warmth. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, which takes place on the alien world of Gethen, materially manifests what Woolf metaphorizes in *A Room of*

¹ *TTL* 56-7.

² LeGuin writes, "I find [Woolf's] thought and work wonderful in itself...[t]he rhythm of Woolf's prose is to my ear the subtlest and strongest in English fiction." Ursula K. LeGuin, *Steering the Craft* (Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1988) 46-47.

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929) 167.

One's Own. That is to say, LeGuin populates Gethen with a race of androgynous beings. A male ambassador from earth must not only learn the culture of an alien race, but also to confront the deeply ingrained dualistic aspects of his own understanding, which is rooted in the separation of the sexes.

The summer before beginning this thesis I wrote to LeGuin, listing a few of the themes and images that I thought she had in common with Virginia Woolf. She replied (to my surprise):

Dear Shiwei Zhou,

...Virginia Woolf? I love and admire her the most of any 20th century writer. My mother gave me *A Room of One's Own* when I was 15 or 16 – it made me a feminist forever...some of the parallels you see are influence, not coincidence – her mind and her work are so infinitely rich, so generous – she makes all the men look just a little bit mean and self-centered...⁴

By LeGuin's own admission, it seems that feminism is the most explicit link between Woolf and herself, not science. Yet, like a conspiracy theorist, I could not stop seeing patterns. The use of technology to overcome great distances, which frequently appears in science fiction – with varying degrees of scientific accuracy – as can also be seen in Woolf. LeGuin's "ansible" makes simultaneous conversation possible across light-years without any lag time,⁵ and Woolf in her memoir wishes for a machine that she could plug into the wall and "listen in to the past...turn up August 1890" (*MB* 67).

Another set of correspondences made me think again about the connections between Woolf and science. In 1937, British writer Olaf Stapledon published *Starmaker*, a work of science fiction in which the unnamed protagonist – in the form of a disembodied consciousness –

⁴ Ursula K. LeGuin, letter to the author, 12 May 2009. The underlined emphasis is hers.

⁵ Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2003) 276.

joins other explorers on a cosmic journey across time and space to find the ultimate creator, the Starmaker.⁶ The book is considered a classic of British science fiction and is taught at this university in a class on science fiction (along with LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, in fact). In July of 1937 Woolf wrote to Stapledon after reading his book:

Dear Mr. Stapledon,

I would have thanked you for your book before, but I have been very busy and have only just had time to read it. I don't suppose that I have understood more than a small part – all the same I have understood enough to be greatly interested, and elated too, since sometimes it seems to me that you are grasping ideas that I have tried to express, much more fumblingly, in fiction. But you have gone much further and I can't help envying you – as one does those who reach what one has aimed at.⁷

Stapledon had also read Woolf's *The Years*, published earlier that year. He replied,

Dear Mrs. Woolf,

It gives me great pleasure to know that you liked my book, and that some of the ideas in it fall in line with your own thought. The book falls very far short of my hopes for it, both in plan and expression, but I suppose that is almost inevitable. I have recently read "The Years" with delight, and also with despair and the thought of the contrast between your art and my own pedestrian method.⁸

⁶ Olaf Stapledon, *Starmaker* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968).

⁷ Reproduced by Kim Stanley Robinson. "Science Fiction: the Stories of Now" *New Scientist* 2726 (16 September 2009)

⁸ Robert Crossley, ed., *An Olaf Stapledon Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997) 283-4.

That Woolf had corresponded with, and praised a science fiction writer for “grasping ideas that [she] had tried to express” was, for me, a sufficiently strong archival foothold to justify looking into the connections between Virginia Woolf and “Science.”

I encountered this correspondence in Holly Henry’s *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science*.⁹ Along with a few other critical works, Henry’s book occupies the small yet persistent niche of criticism on Woolf that examines her interaction with scientific ideas and technological devices. During Woolf’s lifetime, Einstein proposed his ideas of relativity, wireless broadcasting technologies came into use, and automobiles entered mass manufacture. Essays in the collection *Virginia Woolf and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* examine how Woolf responds to new technologies such as the motorcar, radio, and wireless broadcasting, among others. Henry, in her book, looks especially at how the telescope shaped Woolf’s narrative strategies and metaphors – what she calls Woolf’s “global aesthetics.”¹⁰ Collectively, these critics have made a well-supported case for the interaction between specific scientific devices and ideas, and Woolf’s body of work.

The question of how to connect the “mass on the right hand with the mass on the left” – here between the masses of literature and science – is Lily Briscoe’s, and it is mine. And the danger is the same, that “the unity of the whole might be broken,” – if there had been a unity to begin with. These critics have laid the groundwork and provided archival legitimacy in the study of how technological devices are embedded in Woolf’s writing. My project will take theirs as a touchstone and pursue a different end. I do not intend to draw out the influence of a single scientific idea or technological device on Woolf’s aesthetic, but rather to trace the pattern behind

⁹ Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Henry has an entire chapter in which she reads Woolf alongside Stapledon, which is why I do not include Stapledon as a large part of this thesis.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

technological devices that act as literary devices in her work. I will use the term “devices” in lieu of either “technologies” or “objects” to refer to the x-ray, the motorcar, the airplane, et cetera, partially because Woolf had used the term when she began *The Waves* and found it recalcitrant to her methods: “Several problems cry out at once to be solved... One wants some device which is not a trick”.¹¹ Mainly, I use “devices” because of its neutrality in critical discourses that make use of Foucault’s “technologies of the self”,¹² or the ones that distinguish between “objects” and “things.”¹³ “Device” is also handily interchangeable between the modes of technology and literature. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “device” both in its technological manifestation – “an invention, contrivance; *esp.* a mechanical contrivance... for some particular purpose” – and its literary use – “a character, event, narrative technique, etc., used in order to bring about the desired effect.”¹⁴ As I am attempting to suggest the interaction between technology and literature, device becomes a ferry of meaning and connotation.

I intend that, by focusing on technological devices, this analysis will not only engage itself with commentators who work especially with Woolf and technology, but also be in conversation with critics who approach Woolf from philosophical and phenomenological perspectives. This is partially because of the nature of the scientific devices themselves – “[t]here are codes by where our interpretive attention makes them meaningful.”¹⁵ Technological devices function in more than one code, or one discourse. I will draw on phenomenological and philosophical readings of Woolf because technological devices speak on matters of perception,

¹¹ “Wednesday, 25 September 1929.” Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, Leonard Woolf, ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), 143. Cited by Beer, 78.

¹² Lorraine Daston, et al., *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007) 198.

¹³ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 4.

¹⁴ “Device.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Online edition, 2010.

¹⁵ Bill Brown. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 4. This is how Brown defines “objects,” and the definition is appropriate, though I am not using his term.

subjectivity, ethics, and power relations. But the philosophical and the phenomenological schools of interpretation are not the immediate context of this work.

Because of the episodic nature of this thesis, I will occasionally switch between novels, and also from Woolf's fictional writings to her nonfiction. To borrow from Ann Banfield, the thesis is organized by the "repetition of themes, of images," and "any chronologic will be ignored, any difference between individual works...like the unconscious in its ignorance of time."¹⁶ In the first chapter I will look at how Woolf uses technological devices as literary devices to overcome obstacles to understanding to create a fiction of unity between separate characters. Lily's x-ray and Mr. Bankes's telephone, among other technological devices, allow individual characters to realize his or her internal vision, to access the interiority of others, or to envision the vanished past. This crafted unity is central in Woolf's idea of freedom of the mind and implicated in her meditations on art, feminism, and war. Although the ultimate unity between persons, eras, and perspectives may prove impossible, the redeeming movement of the imagination creates a necessary fiction to hold discontinuous parts together.

Chapter two will move from technologies that enable science fiction to actual technologies that restructure perception and social interaction. Omnibuses, motorcars, and airplanes link the people of London in tangible ways by making them aware of their shared, simultaneous existence. Woolf uses devices of modern transportation to show that the fundamental element in all human relations is one's awareness of being alive at the same time and in the same space as others. Emerging from that is an understanding of the tenuousness that pervades all relationships, and a delight in the brief loss of ego that accompanies connection. Most relationships can be derived from the brief illusory tethering in which one is liberated from

¹⁶ Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) xiv.

one's own body and mind. Devices of transportation destabilize the self and relationships as it democratizes them.

"Discontinuity" and "continuity,"¹⁷ are terms that have been applied to Virginia Woolf's narrative technique, but not to the network of scientific devices she mobilizes in her writing. Though Woolf did not comment explicitly on technology, devices of imagination and technology become co-extensive with one another in her work. She is not only modern for the narrative techniques she employs and the subjects she deals with, but also for of her sensitivity to the playful implications of technology. The possibilities offered by these technological devices form a springboard for Woolf's imagination – sometimes returning her to the present, sometimes launching her into the air.

¹⁷ Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf, the Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 145.

CHAPTER ONE

“TAP ALL YOUR SENSATIONS”: DEVICES OF UNITY

But my dear child, do you know that in half a century there will be methods of circumventing these divisions of Aunt and Nephew? By attaching a small valve something like a leech to the back of your neck I shall tap all your sensations; the present system [of letter-writing] is a mere anachronism; that I should be here and you there and nothing between us but a blue sheet (of paper I mean).¹

- *Letter to Quentin Bell, 28 October 1930*

In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee points to the letter above as a “futuristic joke to Quentin” wherein Woolf “indulg[es] her pleasure in science fiction – like her prophecies of a telephone that could see or an electric machine that could connect us to the past.”² In her published works, Virginia Woolf often employs tropes of technology, inventing fantastical machines such as the one in the epigraph. Even her famous dictum on modernism – from the essay “Modern Fiction” – describes the mind like a sensitive scientific instrument. A mind that “record[s] the atoms as they fall...in the order in which they fall” would observe the succession of daily sensations as a seismometer registers the minute tremors of the earth.³

¹Nigel Nicholson et al, ed., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV, 1929-1931* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 238, cited by Lee, 537.

² Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 537. The prophecy of the seeing telephone refers to this passage in *The Years*: “‘One of these days d’you think you’ll be able to see things at the end of the telephone?’ Peggy said, getting up... ‘What’s that?’ said Eleanor, for she had not caught her remark about the telephone. Peggy did not repeat it. They stood by the window waiting for the cab” (TY 311). It is a passage more about the limits of communication rather than its capabilities. The electric machine will feature in the analysis later in the chapter.

³ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984) 288.

While Woolf takes pleasure in crafting these science fictions, she also uses technological devices as literary devices. In the epigraph Woolf compares her own childhood to that of Quentin and Julian Bell's. She grew up in a Victorian intellectual household ruled over by a moody, tyrannical father, while her nephews enjoyed the openness of Vanessa and Clive Bell's modern marriage and dealt as equals with their parents' highly intellectual friends. In her diaries, Woolf writes, "Nessa's children are terrifyingly sophisticated... they have grown up without any opposition: nothing to twist or stunt. Hence they have reached stages at sixteen or seventeen which I reached only at twenty-six or twenty-seven."⁴ The "valve" of the epigraph is a device to bridge the irreconcilable gulf between her nephew's childhood and her own. Hermione Lee comments on this letter, writing, "[Woolf is] partly indulging her pleasure in science fiction.... But she [is] also commenting on how extraordinarily *modern* their relationship felt."⁵ Lee distinguishes the nature of Woolf and Quentin's relationship from the way that relationship is expressed. She suggests that Woolf's pleasure in science fiction is an entity apart from the sense of strangeness that Woolf is trying to convey with that figure of speech. I think, rather, that the technological metaphor is central to the articulation and the resolution of the gap between aunt and nephew. That Woolf finds it necessary to employ advanced technology to understand Quentin reveals the extent of her bemusement at the nature of their relationship (the pun of with the "blue sheet" at the end of the passage hints at the openness between aunt and nephew). As metaphors "search for an ideal wholeness which [their] disjunctive nature persistently counters,"⁶ the sensation-tapping valve emphasizes the discontinuity between two people even as it provides

⁴ Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *A Moments Liberty: the Shorter Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), 237, cited by Lee, 537.

⁵Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 537.

⁶ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000) 92.

a vehicle to overcome that discontinuity. Technological devices do the work of metaphors: they unite even as they highlight disunities.

The difficulty of accessing another person's interior thoughts drives Woolf to use technological metaphors. She employs the "valve" to bridge the gap of understanding between her and Quentin. Likewise, the female narrator of *Three Guineas* – "the educated man's daughter" – finds no other way of comprehending why her male correspondent (or indeed all the male species) would go to war except through drastic medical intervention: "complete understanding could only be achieved through blood transfusion and memory transfusion – a miracle still beyond the reach of science" (*TG* 7, 13). This scientific miracle of complete understanding means that immaterial "memory" could be transferred as one would transfer something substantial, like "blood." Just as Woolf imagines tapping Quentin's sensations via a parasitic "leech"-like valve, transferring his blood along with his sensations to her mind, the narrator of *Three Guineas* suggests a similar transfusion. Epistemological unity, the *complete* understanding of the other person, is achieved through physical, material sameness. This is of course impossible: "a miracle still beyond the reach of science" or not to appear for another "half a century" – and as we know, living more than fifty years after Woolf's letter, this remains a science fiction. In both examples, technological devices function as the vehicle of a surreal but pleasurable science fiction, a tool that resolves the otherwise irresolvable dilemma of human understanding and empathy. In a way, it could be said that every act of human bonding is an act of the imagination. For the "device for becoming...inextricabl[e]" with the other person does not exist. It is a fiction; it is the metaphorical movement of the mind (*TTL* 54).

Chapter one explores how Virginia Woolf employs technological devices as literary devices to overcome the obstacles to the understanding and achieve unity. The obstacles are

numerous: the expanse of time and space, the opacity of flesh and the ambiguousness of human relations. Technological devices, employed as metaphors, enable one to bridge the discontinuity between one person and another, between the ideal and the real world, and between the past and the future. Despite their fictive, hypothetical nature, the unities engendered prove indispensable to human bonding. They are necessary fictions.

I

The complicated task of unifying personal experience and shared reality is exemplified in *To the Lighthouse* with a phone call that William Bankes places to Mrs. Ramsay. Mr. Bankes is a widower and an eminent botanist who had been with Mr. Ramsay at university; Mrs. Ramsay is a celebrated beauty, and though she is in her fifties she has retained much of her grace.

“Nature has but little clay,” said Mr. Bankes once, much moved by [Mrs. Ramsay’s] voice on the telephone, though she was only telling him a fact about a train, “like that of which she moulded you.” He saw here at the end of the line clearly Greek, straight, blue-eyed. How incongruous it seemed, to be telephoning a woman like that. The graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in the meadows of asphodel to compose that face. He would catch the 10:30 at Euston.

(*TTL* 32-3)

Hearing Mrs. Ramsay’s voice on the telephone, Mr. Bankes envisions her as a Greek goddess upon the “meadows of asphodel.” His musing on how “incongruous it seem[s]” to be telephoning that particular incarnation of Mrs. Ramsay, however, is illogical. For without the mediation of the telephone, he would be confronting her real, embodied presence, and not creating idealized pictures of her in his mind. Telephone communication only transmits voice; as

such it presents each speaker to the other as a “truncated, abstract individual,” a voice disjoined from the body.⁷ It is Mr. Bankes’s inability to see Mrs. Ramsay as they converse the telephone that makes his vision possible. Though he knows what Mrs. Ramsay looks like, on the telephone she takes a re-embodiment along loftier, Grecian lines. For Mr. Bankes, the incongruity of telephoning “a woman like that” is paradoxical: only on the telephone could he speak to “a woman like that.” But transfixed by his vision of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Bankes operates with a logic based in *that* reality, and forgets his phone.

Mr. Bankes has the device that unifies the ideal and real visions of Mrs. Ramsay, but not the device with which to articulate his feelings and thereby make the private public. The mediation of the telephone makes it possible for Mr. Bankes to see Mrs. Ramsay as “Greek” and “blue-eyed” in a field of asphodel and also as a woman in her fifties, the mother of eight. For Mr. Bankes, both of these are real. Lily Briscoe observes him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay and remarks,

It was love...distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain. The world by all means should have shared it, could Mr. Bankes have said why that woman pleased him so; why the sight of her reading a fairy tale to her boy had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution of a scientific problem. (*TTL* 51)

It may seem a cold and impersonal characterization for such ardent admiration as Mr. Bankes, to describe the sight of Mrs. Ramsay as having “precisely the same effect as the solution of a scientific problem.” Yet it is the ability of a scientific solution to stand on its own, to take on a reality separate of its discoverer, that unveils the extent of Mr. Bankes’s love. His vision of Mrs.

⁷Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 215.

Ramsay's transcendent beauty has taken on an existence of its own. As a poet to his poems, Mr. Bankes is progenitor of his vision, but now the vision has taken on its own life. The work of art stands apart from its maker – or rather, that is what Mr. Bankes believes it to do. In fact he does not have the instruments to translate his private vision into a public vision. He does not possess the ability to articulate “why that woman pleased him so” to others and thereby reify the separate, ontological reality of that transcendent feeling he finds in Mrs. Ramsay. He cannot distill it, as he does the essence of plants in his experiments. In the laboratory, he has scientific instruments that assist him in reifying scientific hypotheses as scientific truths. Yet for a matter of personal emotion, Mr. Bankes finds his tools lacking. In other words, he needs the instruments of science, the devices recalibrated to the mode of human emotion and experience to communicate his experience. Though he is an example of how technological devices allow for both the ideal and the real, Mr. Bankes cannot, himself, conceive of the device to publicize the private reality.

II

It is Lily Briscoe who possesses the device – in the form of a mental x-ray – that can break down the barrier between public and private. On the Isle of Skye, the Ramsays and their guests sit down to a magnificent dinner one summer evening. Lily, an unmarried painter, sits across from Charles Tansley. Tansley is Woolf's caricature of the Oxford intellectual; he is self-important and disagreeable. When he feels left out of the conversation at the dinner table, he soothes his prickled pride by lauding his own intellect and wondering why no one asks him for *his* story or *his* opinion. Only the restraints of good manners prevent him from speaking. Lily observes him:

Sitting opposite [Charles Tansley], could she not see, as in an x-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself, lying dark in the mist of his flesh – that thin mist which convention laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation? (*TTL* 93)

Within *To the Lighthouse*, vision is Lily Briscoe's domain. She is often described as having "Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face" (*TTL* 29). In moments of deep thought, Lily "screw[s] up her little Chinese eyes" and seems to gaze into another reality altogether (*TTL* 160). Sight leaps over space to reach an object discontinuous from the viewer. Likewise, insight overcomes the inaccessibility of another's interiority to expose personal motivations and deep-held beliefs to the understanding. Lily's insight pierces like an x-ray, transforming the opacity of flesh and the inscrutability of social conventions into "mist", turning what had been private into available knowledge. Stephen Kern writes, "The opening up of the interior anatomical terrain of the human body by the x-ray was part of a general reappraisal of what is properly inside and what is outside the body, the mind, physical objects, and nations,"⁸ and in 1897 Woolf had attended a lecture on x-rays, then called "Rontgen Rays."⁹ Although Lily cannot actually read Charles Tansley's thoughts, the metaphor of her x-ray vision here represents her conviction in her understanding of him. Her insight enables her to reconsider her judgment of Charles Tansley, now with the unified knowledge of his internal "vanity" and his exterior restraint. This changes the way she relates to him and what he stands for.

⁸ Stephen Kern. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 6.

⁹ Account of this encounter from *Passionate Apprentice*. Saturday 9 January : "Nessa and Adrian and I ... had a lecture on the Rontgen Rays ... We were shown photographs of normal hands and diseased hands, a baby, and a puppy - and a lady and gentleman from the audience had their hands photographed - the gent. declared that a piece of needle was in his hand, but the photograph did not discover it." I read the last occasion as the photograph disproving the gentleman, as finding no needle, and not a failure of the machine. The disinterested x-ray is invested with greater claim to ontological truth than self-report, even from a gentleman.

Mitchell A. Leaska, ed., *Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals, 1897-1909* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1992) 10.

Lily's metaphorical x-ray enables the transgression of social norms and gender conventions. Lily knows that it is her duty as an observant and "nice" woman to give Charles Tansley a chance to assert his knowledge (*TTL* 94). Yet her insight has transformed Charles Tansley from a male dinner-guest – to whom she is obligated to make conversation – into a picture of bones – to which she need say nothing whatsoever. She takes the catalogue of his "ribs and thigh bones" with medical precision and a clinical eye. Conceiving of Charles Tansley as a picture changes the politics of their relationship, turns it into something impersonal, observational. There is an impartiality in how photographs display themselves completely to whoever is looking, hiding no secrets. Though Lily is one of a few who notices Charles Tansley's discomfort, she conceives of his internal state as being photographically transparent to all. Thus, though she observes his "burning desire," she feels no more obligation to relieve him of it than anyone else at the table. Lily's insight, therefore, liberates her from the strictures of gendered social convention.

There is a code of behavior, [Lily] knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her own occupation might be, to relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself, as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames...But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of those things? So she sat there smiling. (*TTL* 93)

The unwritten social "code of behavior" dictates that Lily must "relieve[]" Charles Tansley's desire to air his vanity, but Lily does not yield. This social "code" is an aspect of what Alex Zwerdling categorically calls the "real world," a term he uses for its ability to "convey the sense

of an ineluctable impediment to some of our deepest desires.”¹⁰ The restrictive nature of the “code” lies in its gendered division of obligations. The “real world” is one in which “[i]t behooves the woman” to “say something nice” to the young man, any young man, who flounders for words at the dinner table (*TTL* 94). In return, it behooves the man to rescue a woman, any woman, from the London underground, were it to “burst into flames.” This reveals how the “code,” the system of gendered social behavior is also extremely impersonal. One’s actions toward a member of the opposite sex are based on an exchange of obligations based upon unspoken rules. These exchanges, for all their impersonality, are also highly political. Other pervasive assumptions about the role of men and women can be less innocent, less harmful than the rule that a lady will assist a young man in conversation. Charles Tansley espouses a few of the more damaging assumptions, being the source of this misogynistic mantra: “women can’t paint, women can’t write,” “women can’t write, women can’t paint” (*TTL* 51, 93, 163). He stands *for* the system of impersonal yet restrictive gender obligations because his behavior and demands activate those exchanges. He also functions as the mouthpiece for the repressive, deterministic views of that system. But Lily, by being able to see *into* Charles Tansley, places herself outside his cosmos of restrictive social mores. The x-ray becomes the device with which she frees herself from her obligation to relieve the vanity of young men, and likewise frees them of their obligation to rescue her. In so doing, she also removes herself from any task or fate accorded her by the fact of her gender alone. Lily’s response to that “ineluctable impediment” – in the form of Charles Tansley – is to re-vision the world and her obligations in it, taking out gender altogether. The device of her insight gives her another metaphor for relating to the world, replacing the system of relationships already in place. When Erich Auerbach writes in “The Brown Stocking” that “[i]n Virginia Woolf’s case the exterior events have actually lost their

¹⁰ Alex Zwerdling. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 4.

hegemony,”¹¹ he is referring to how external events little resemble or correlate with the internal moods they trigger. In this instance, Lily also demolishes the “exterior... hegemony” of the social world. By snubbing Charles Tansley, she rejects the “ineluctable” demands of the real world to live her internal vision. The “exterior” system loses its hegemonic domination over the individual, though not in the way that Auerbach means it. The ramifications of Lily’s insight manifest as she sits there “smiling,” detached from Charles Tansley’s discomfort. Her internal understanding subverts the “exterior” demands of gender and class. Auerbach’s analysis applies not only as he uses it, in the causal relation between external stimulus and internal response, but also in the definition of “exterior” as the larger social world and the internal world as an understanding that sees the possible escape. The upshot of all this? That Lily can sit eating – and not speaking – at the dinner table. Also, that Lily can paint all her life, and “need never marry anybody” (*TTL* 179).

Lily chooses the (science) fiction she perceives by her x-ray vision over the social fiction of gender roles. She chooses to be free from what the “exterior” world seems to tell her. She liberates herself from one “real” world, in order to live in the other. This is an extremely powerful movement of mind: it rearranges the cosmos, evaporates obligation, allows for a woman’s artistic life. Yet the power of the science fiction lies mainly in removing the hegemony of the exterior, rather than in establishing a higher level of hegemonic control. That is to say, it does not argue for the subjugation of men by women, but a mutual freedom *from* obligation. Instead of a hegemonic hierarchy, we arrive at a multiplicity of realities, possibilities whose powers relative to one another cannot ultimately be determined because they cannot all be lived at once. One must choose from the many possible realities which one to inhabit. At that same

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, “The Brown Stocking” in *Virginia Woolf: Modern Critical Perspectives* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 31, cited by Westling, 864.

dinner, Lily realizes she could “put the tree further in the middle [of her painting]” and “never marry anybody” (*TTL* 61, 179). The freedom to paint and the freedom from a husband are one and the same. It is to live one’s own vision, instead of agreeing with the tyrannical fiction espoused by Charles Tansley, among many others. The metaphor of Lily’s x-ray vision contains this understanding, implicitly.

Unlike Charles Tansley, William Bankes is able to accept Lily’s choice of career and spinsterhood because he possesses a “scientific mind.” The “scientific mind” of Mr. Bankes is one that, following the earlier analysis, accepts the separateness of even his own creations and sensations, taking them to have an ontological reality apart from himself. When Mr. Bankes inquires about the nature of the purple triangle in the corner of Lily’s painting, she informs him that it is Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James at the window. “Simple, commonplace, as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested...mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence... He took it scientifically in complete good faith. The truth was that all his prejudices were on the other side” (*TTL* 56). Ten years later, Lily still recalls the event:

Thanks to his scientific mind he understood – a proof of disinterested intelligence which had pleased her and comforted her enormously. One could talk of painting then seriously to a man. Indeed, his friendship had been one of the pleasures of her life. She loved William Bankes. (*TTL* 180)

Mr. Bankes is no stranger to multiple, incongruous realities. His love of Mrs. Ramsay is characterized by the tension between her “real” life and the reality of her in his vision. He thus can understand how, transformed through the devices of Lily’s art – paint and canvas – “mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence.” Like the distilled essences of his plants, the extract of Mrs. Ramsay and James take on a form in Lily’s painting quite unlike the

classical renderings on the subject of Madonna and child. Charles Tansley assumes the hegemony of one single system of understanding and uses the logic of that system to determine other people's obligation to him. Mr. Bankes has the advantage of multiple perspectives. It can be seen in *To the Lighthouse* that Lily and Mr. Bankes, who have greater facility with technological devices (sometimes in the form of metaphor) have a different world view than Charles Tansley, who is not linked to any technology in the narrative. Specifically, those equipped with technological metaphors have *more* world views. They have their choice between possibilities, and the opportunity to evade obligations, which are forced on them by the exterior world.¹² So far, in *To the Lighthouse*, facility with technological devices points to an understanding of the freedom of multiple perspectives and impersonality. To have a telephone or an x-ray is to have another pair of eyes, another perspective. The value of that other perspective lies in how it transcends, how it steps outside of, the hegemonic system. In this context, multi-perspectivalism is more than a purely aesthetic mode to capture life as it is; it is a deeply ethical way to live. What Lily finds in William Bankes's willing, but "disinterested intelligence" is "comfort," not because the cool, critical eye offers any hint of softness or warmth in itself, but because it does make restrictive demands, and because it can accept all possibilities equally "in complete good faith." The scientific mind is not, of itself, necessarily liberating. Yet the way that it suspends disbelief at the existence of other realities, with rules different than its own, gives rise to new possibilities of human relations. Thus, despite Mrs. Ramsay's well-intentioned machinations, Lily never marries, "not even William Bankes" (*TTL* 178). Though Lily "loved"

¹² Woolf's idea of killing the "Angel in the House," presented in her paper "Professions for Women," for example, is one such creative evasion of the obligations of a Victorian Era wife. "[H]ad I not killed her, she would have killed me," Woolf writes, "she would have plucked the heart out of my writing."

Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," in *A Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1984) 278.

him, it is a love outside of the traditional model – a love that does not culminate in, nor find its highest and purest expression in marriage. In fact, it is a love sustained by *not* marrying, by the resistance of that last intimacy. It is a love partly based in separation, a love that an artist might bear for the vision of a scientist.

III

Some technological devices bring together two visions of reality, others merge worlds of separate scales. Woolf uses scaling changes mediated by technology to create a different conception of human civilization and human warfare. Airplanes and telescopes are the technological devices that mediate discontinuous aerial distance. Through the change of perspective they bring, human values become utterly and irrevocably transformed. Just as Lily's second perspective allows her to free herself from the social conventions of the Victorian World, the aerial view offered by the airplane offers peaceful, ethical possibilities to counter the restriction of perspective intrinsic to war making.

In Woolf's essay "Flying over London," the narrator, flying in an airplane, notes how differently she thinks of herself and of London from the vantage of the sky:

One becomes conscious of being a little mammal, hot blooded, hard-boned, with a clot of red blood in one's body, trespassing up in the fine air... [Below] one could see through the Bank of England; all the business houses were transparent: the River Thames was as the Romans saw it, as Palaeolithic man saw it, with the rhinoceros digging his horn into the roots of the rhododendrons. So immortally fresh and virginal London looked and England was earth merely, merely the world. (*CE4* 168)

The change of perspective brought on by the intervention of distance is portrayed in its effect as equivalent to a change brought on by the intervention of time. The aerial perspective turns modern England into a prehistoric, “virginal” Eden. From her vantage point in the sky, the narrator finds herself engaged in a wholly different set of imagined relations with the edifices of her own culture and other beings of her time. She ceases to identify as a human, but sees herself one with all “mammal[s]” who feel out of their element, “trespassing up in the fine air.” The ground is no longer cradle to the center of her civilization; the buildings that stand for civilization – “the Bank of England,” the “business houses” – vanish with the intercession of distance. And from her jarring, unfamiliar perspective far above the humdrum of life, the narrator imagines she is looking upon the past, Paleolithic face of England. Certainly neither the Roman soldier nor the Paleolithic man saw the earth as she sees it, from twenty thousand feet above the ground, flown there by the technological device of that – transparent – civilization. In that way she is a little like Mr. Bankes, forgetful of the telephone though it enables his vision of Mrs. Ramsay. The ease with which the airplane transforms the edifices of her civilization into nothingness – as Lily’s vision cuts through the opacity of Charles Tansley’s flesh – necessitates a reframing on the narrator’s part of the solidity and significance of her London. The second reality always requires certain aspects of the first vision to be made transparent, unimportant, in order to highlight other aspects. In this case, the transparency of civilization, of nations, brings the narrator into community with all mammal-kind and into continuity from the past. Losing sight of the particulars, she gains a perspective of a greater, more inclusive community.

Her remove makes it impossible for the narrator to regard the tribulation of certain people with perfect empathy, demonstrating how land-bound values may be defused and made equally

transparent. As the narrator looks through a pair of Zeiss glasses at London, she is torn between empathy and mild bemusement at a scene of stopped traffic.

Through a pair of Zeiss glasses one could indeed now see the tops of the heads of separate men...And one had to change perpetually air values into land values. There were blocks in the city of traffic sometimes a foot long; these had to be translated into eleven or twelve Rolls Royces in a row with city magnets waiting furious; and one had to add up the fury of the magnates; and say – even though it was all silent and the block was only a few inches in length, how scandalous the control of the traffic is in the city of London. (*CE4 170*)

The airplane compounds the narrator's view with that of prehistory; the Zeiss glasses brings her back in sympathy with her fellow beings, albeit a sympathy made sluggish and cool by the intervening distance. This is the effect of distance: as the relative size of people and buildings decrease, their significance is diminished in like degree. For while the Zeiss glasses bring the sight of other human beings back into her awareness, a similar operation of reunification must be accomplished in the mind before their "land" travails are accepted as legitimate from her vantage point. "Land values" and "air values" reside somewhat contentiously in juxtaposition, forcing the narrator to "translate" between them. To the "few inches in length" of silent street traffic, she must restore the "fury of the magnates." The reader detects a touch of satire, a faint feminine mocking. "This humorous telescopic perspective on London's class-conscious society," writes Holly Henry, "exposes social class and human civilization in general as based on self-aggrandizement, a motive Woolf blames for the kind of aggression that leads to war."¹³ The "fury" of city magnates trapped in traffic, though mocked and ridiculed, has in addition to its

¹³ Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2003) 68.

laughable diminutiveness a more threatening and somber dimension. The narrator's persistence in trying to translate between "land values" and "air values" – mediating between the two visions of human civilization – contains in it the implicit acknowledgment of the power of that fury multiplied. A lack of perspective – or perspectives rather – is cause for fury. Whereas the narrator has the three-dimensional freedom of the skies, these other beings are locked into the planar rule of transportation and infrastructure. The narrator is possessed of multiple perspectives, but the city magnates fuming in their Rolls Royces have only one. Like Charles Tansley, they are bound into one system of understanding, here represented spatially by their confinement to the flat plane of the earth's surface. The essay does double-handed work, both satirizing the triviality and acknowledging the potential impact of human aggression. Satire, as a literary device, functions like the pair of Zeiss glasses given to the narrator on the airplane: it distances and makes trivial the pressing problems on the ground. Yet the relief it brings by distance reveals just how imminent those problems are. The essay concludes with the narrator confessing they had not gone up into the air at all; all the preceding sights and images are imagined. The vision provided by the airplane and Zeiss glasses, like Lily's x-ray, manifest in the mind, which to me speaks of how a metaphorical agility of the imagination does the work that technological devices would do to multiply perspectives in the understanding. This essay is positioned directly before "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" in Woolf's collected essays, and it seems that the editors are moving the reader to wonder if a shift in perspective could similarly turn the anger of vying nations into the mild, quizzical regard that the narrator bestows on the "scandalous" control of traffic. Having the perspective of distance, it is rather obvious that what Henry sees as the "self-aggrandizement" leading human warfare is confined to land values only.

Air values provide an alternate system with three dimensions instead of the planar, grounded two. It offers escape from a single perspective that may prevent war.

Similarly Woolf's essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" uses devices of technology to advocate for mental agility and creativity as antidote to war. In the essay she describes the experience of lying in the dark while the German airplanes fly overhead on a bombing raid. Woolf describes how people become entrapped in war with terms that explicitly reference technological objects: "we are both prisoners tonight – he boxed up in his machine with a gun handy: we lying in the dark with a mask handy" (*CE4* 173). Used for purposes of war, technologies limit possibilities instead of expanding them. Instead of being our conduit to an alternate view of the world, technologies used for war "box [one] in", subjugate a human being until he becomes part of that machine. The hegemonic logic of war places strictures on the perspective, freezes the imagination into one mode only. So the bombers can drop bombs at night when they are too far above the ground to imagine those they are killing. To restore humanism to the soldier, Woolf writes, "we must give him access to the creative feelings...we must free him from the machine," and not only the English soldier, the German, and French as well (*CE4*: 175).

The ability to live with incongruous feelings, to delight and find use in it, is a quality of humankind – a quality that could make each person recognize the essential sameness in the other, and the essential futility and narrow-mindedness of fury. There is similarity between Lily's dilemma – how to be a woman painter – and the narrator's in "Flying over London" and "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" – how to stop war. Indeed, throughout her life Woolf would try to "illuminate the connections between the patriarchal status quo, the relatively subordinate

position of women, and war making.”¹⁴ The “we” she uses in this essay and in *Three Guineas*, which is another anti-war tract, is a feminine plural. For Woolf, there is a connection between Charles Tansley and war; that is, she sees the connection between the hegemonic masculine fiction that “women can’t paint, women can’t write” and the “preposterous masculine fiction”¹⁵ that is war. Women, or rather, the feminine plural “we,” have the advantage of a different perspective simply by the fact of their different sex. “We” have the ability to envision other fictions, countering fictions to do battle with the predominant one. Of course, anyone else can also create these necessary fictions that engender peace and understanding between men and women, English and German, enemy and ally. Here is Woolf, in a diary entry

... the existence of life in another human being is as difficult to realise as a play of Shakespeare when the book is shut. This occurred to me when I saw Adrian talking to the tall German prisoner. By rights they should have been killing each other. The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one’s imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him – the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent.¹⁶

Realizing the “existence of life in another human being” requires the same thing that one needs to realize a play of Shakespeare’s: the “imagination.” It is the imagination that turns devices of science and technology into metaphors of understanding. The reason for this metaphor has been, consistently, to realize – here not only to understand but also to *make real* – “the existence of life in another human being.” It is impossible to find absolute, material unity with the object of one’s

¹⁴ Mark Hussey, “Introduction,” in *TTL* xiv-xv.

¹⁵ “Letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, 23 January 1916,” Harold Nicholson et al. ed., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume II, 1912-1922* (Orlando: Harvest Books 1976) 76, cited by Hussey, xiv

¹⁶ “Tuesday 27 August 1918,” Anne Oliver Bell, ed. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume I, 1915-1919* (Orlando, Harvest Books, 1979) 186.

curiosity. Woolf can never actually inhabit the mind of Quentin Bell; neither can Lily Briscoe truly read the mind of Charles Tansley. This underlying and persistent discontinuity is “the reason why it is easy to kill another person,” especially if the imagination does not find a rope to throw across the chasm. Beneath every leap of the imagination is the precipice, the otherwise irreconcilable discontinuity. The device that Lily never finds, the “device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored,” is on one hand, nonexistent; yet it is the fiction of that device being real that allows the imagination to imagine the existence, the reality and “infinite possibilities” of another person’s life (*TTL* 54). “The drive in metaphor towards merging, towards the single domain,” writes Gillian Beer, “is a search for an ideal wholeness which its disjunctive nature persistently counters...the drive towards divergence and diversification survives through metaphor, only a little less powerful than the drive towards stable equivalence, and persistently subverting it.”¹⁷ Underlying every unity, there is the discontinuity that had made the unifying metaphor necessary in the first place. Imaginative unity is the normal human response to discontinuity and incongruity. By that logic, human aggression and conflict arises from the sheer inability to manage this one act, from the “sluggish[ness]” of the imperfect “imagination.” Therefore the way that one “Can fight with the mind” is not by committing aggressive acts, but imaginative ones (*CE4* 173). The ease and facility with which one can imagine the life of the enemy combatant is a universal weapon to diffuse war. Woolf’s pacifism is one that is intensely personal. It depends on individual transformation through imaginative acts. For that exercise of the creative mind is not limited to artists and scientists alone; it is a necessary quality of the imagination for all human-kind if we are to imagine living in a world peacefully with one another, that is, to live in a world where

¹⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolution Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1983) 92.

other perspectives inform, detract from, but also mesh with the legitimacy of one's own.

Ultimate unity may be a fiction, but it is a necessary one. It is one that we must adopt to connect and to survive.

IV

Leaving for now the discussion of politics, war making and women's liberation, I would like to turn to another of Woolf's great preoccupations that greatly affected her aesthetics – the past. Within her work, the impossible gap between past and present is also reconciled through the mediating work of technological objects. The gap between present and past is presented much like the gap between one person and another – and perhaps it is one's past and present self who are disjoined from one another in this instance.

In her memoir "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf writes of how heightened scenes from her past can layer themselves onto the present: "Those moments – in the nursery, on the road to the beach – can still be more real than the present moment" (*MB* 67). From this she moves on to invoke a device capable of doing the work of the reminiscing mind more perfectly, and bring the past into the present.

Is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it – the past- as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions... Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into a wall; and listen in to the past. (*MB* 67)

Hermione Lee refers to this device as the “electric machine that could connect us to the past” in the beginning of this chapter. The device can bridge the divide of time and the corresponding ravages upon the memory. It folds the ribbon of time until the past and present nestle against each other in the same mental moment. Woolf may live, here in the present, while diving into her own past as into a river, be “plug[ged]” into the sounds of childhood in St. Ives. She comes into awareness of her own past as if tuning into a show on the radio, experiencing it as something that has its own existence “independent of our minds,” as Mr. Bankes experiences the vision of Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf also used the word “tap” to refer to getting access to Quentin Bell’s sensations in the epigraph. For Quentin, it was to leap into the stream of another personality. Here is it to re-enter the waters at a point upriver of one’s present moment, to be two versions of the same subjectivity at once.

Yet why use these fabricated machines, why employ science fictions? A possible answer lies in how, in Woolf’s experience, the discoveries of science in her lifetime corroborated with her experience of self, memory, and the world. The ideas of new physics introduced by Einstein, images of astronomy popularized by Arthur Eddington and James Jeans in the early twentieth century, together formed a vision of reality not as composed solid objects but rather of wave forms sketching possibilities.¹⁸ The form that reality takes depends on who is looking. Gillian Beer writes, “The physicists did not simply introduce ideas to [Woolf]; rather, their insights and their language coalesced with hers.”¹⁹ The “coalesce[ing]” of scientific truths and Woolf’s own experiential truths, or what Mark Hussy calls her “implicit philosophy,” demonstrates that reality is not ultimately something “ineluctable” and set against the human systems of understanding. Rather, it is the idea that from the deep looking into life itself – whether by the methods of

¹⁸ Louise Westling, “Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World,” *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 855-856.

¹⁹ Gillian Beer, “The Waves, the Life of Anybody,” in *Virginia Woolf: the Common Ground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 113.

science or the methods of fiction— one surfaces with truths that go beyond the boundaries of disciplines and discourses. Like the understanding between Lily and William Bankes, artist and scientist, one emerges with devices of unity that are simultaneous scientific and literary.

The devices here mentioned have mostly been metaphorical. Lily Briscoe doesn't have an x-ray machine, but she sees as if through one; Woolf doesn't desire a camcorder so she can literally "listen in to the past," but to replicate past experiences in her own mind with the fidelity of scientific instruments. Through devices of science, the mind finds its metaphorical powers extended, and with it the ability to receive and represent the complexities of reality. Devices of technology provide the artist with a greater vocabulary of relations and juxtapositions, and by funneling familiar events and people through the unfamiliar devices of science one emerges with new ways of knowing and thinking. "Metaphors are much more than rhetorical devices for conveying complex ideas," writes Laura Otis, "As we form the associations they invite us to make, we do not just learn how to speak and write, we learn how to think".²⁰ Woolf's appropriation of the technologies of twentieth century science into her fiction and reworking of what the devices themselves mean in a humanistic context speaks to the way that the arsenal of literary devices is replenished by the possibilities presented by science.

Thus I find that Mark Hussey's claim that "Virginia Woolf's art tells us not about an external, objective reality, but about our experience of the world" to be reductive.²¹ Woolf does not give up all claims to that objective, ontological reality. She merely turns the idea of objectivity on its head – objectivity emerges from the lived experience. The sense that something exists entirely outside of the self is first and foremost a feeling. There is no objective reality,

²⁰ Laura Otis, "The Metaphoric Circuit: Organic and Technological Communication in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 63.1 (2002) 105.

²¹ Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986) xiii.

without the subjectivity feeling it to be so. This is the way that Mrs. Ramsay is known by Mr. Banks through the device of the telephone. What Woolf does is make the “emotional experience of the object” take on an ontological reality, an existence in its own right. And thereby, in my opinion, she goes beyond merely the claims of “implicit philosophy.” Reality is made by feeling. In a sense we emerge here at a meeting with the pinnacle assertions of phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts, “it is to experience that the ultimate ontological power belongs,”²² an emphatic conclusion that he bases on a theory of the embodied experience in the world. This, in a sense, is true of Woolf. The embodiment that takes place here, unlike Merleau-Ponty’s, is the mind’s ability to embody its own creations and give them ontological reality. The vision leaves the visionary, and takes a distance from the source from whence it sprang – a distance through which it can remain undiminished by the imperfection of the human machinery of feeling and memory. The object becomes a thing so real that one could “fight with it”, as Lily and the narrator suggest in Woolf’s essays. It is so real that one can fight with it, as the narrator of “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid” does to combat the “preposterous masculine fiction” of war, as Lily does to combat a similarly preposterous fiction that “women can’t paint, women can’t write.

I have framed this chapter with devices of unity, though perhaps now in the end it is more truthful to say that it uses devices to craft a fiction that covers and bridges over *discontinuities*. In the end the past can never be reached, the other person never truly grasped, but through the metaphorical knowing of the mind, there is something to be salvaged from one’s own past, some depth to be imagined in the other human being, some freedom to be imagined out of the strictures of society that makes it possible to conceive of a reality different than the one being

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 8, cited by Westling, 864.

inhabited and enacted. From these devices of fiction, we move on to chapter two, which involves technology in a different unifying move. Instead of grasping at the depths, the second chapter travels topographically on the surface to effect a tethering that allows and indeed encourages plurality rather than complete unity.

CHAPTER TWO

“TO LEAVE THE STRAIGHT LINES OF PERSONALITY”:

DEVICES OF CONTIGUITY

[T]he motor is turning out the joy of our lives, an additional life, free and mobile and airy, to live alongside our usual stationary industry. We spin off to Falmer, ride over the Downs, drop into Rottingdean, then sweep over to Seaford, call in pouring rain at Charleston, pass the time of day, return for tea, all as light and easy as a hawk in the air. Soon we shall look back at our pre-motor days as we do now at our days in the caves.¹

- *Diary, 10 August 1927*

The automobile and the experience of motoring are motifs that carry through Virginia Woolf's writing, especially in her novels of London life. Woolf's London is shaped by the ceaseless flow of motorcars and crisscrossed by London omnibuses and trains; her London resounds with the ringing of Big Ben and hums in the wake of aircraft passing overhead.

In chapter one I examine technological devices of the visionary life. The technologies are mostly metaphorical— a mental x-ray, a hypothetical electric machine to access the past, a fictional leech-like device to understand Quentin's thoughts. The technological devices in chapter one are devices of science fiction – or if not, as in the case of Mr. Bankes and his telephone, a device that enables fiction (of Mrs. Ramsay as a Greek goddess). The devices in this chapter, however, are actual technologies that come into mass manufacture during Woolf's

¹ Anne Oliver Bell, ed., *A Moment's Liberty, the Shorter Diary of Virginia Woolf*, (London: The Hogarth Press 1992) 235.

lifetime. The motorcar and the omnibus are enfolded into the everyday life of a Londoner; they organize the movement of people in the city in actuality and in fiction.

Virginia Woolf had an “aficionado’s passion” for the automobile.² In 1927 Virginia and Leonard Woolf bought their first car – a second hand Singer they named “The Umbrella” – with earnings from *To the Lighthouse*.³ Both husband and wife took driving lessons; Leonard soon became a skillful driver, but Virginia did not have the same aptitude for the task. Quentin Bell remembered her having once taken the car “through a hedge,”⁴ and in a letter Woolf confessed to Ethel Sands, “I have driven from the Embankment to the Marble Arch and only knocked one boy very gently off his bicycle.”⁵ Eventually she gave up her driving lessons altogether, but in the summer of 1927 Woolf wrote in her diary that she could “talk of nothing but cars...all images are...tinged with driving a motor.”⁶ It was the liberating power of the motor car that enraptured Woolf,” writes Makiko Minow-Pinkney,⁷ and correspondingly the automobile figured in Woolf’s novels as an enjoyable, if sometimes curious, device of modern technology. The epigraph reflects how the speed of the automobile makes it possible to condense many sights and experiences into a single day. The automobile brings to its occupants variegated weather, terrains, and cities effortlessly. The experience of motoring is rendered in the graceful vocabulary of a dance; the Woolfs “spin off,” “drop into,” “sweep over,” all “light and easy as a hawk in the air.” The motorcar is a way to freedom, providing variety for the mind and movement for the body.

² Jan Morris, ed., *Travels with Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993) 7.

³ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) 502.

⁴ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: a Biography Volume II* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1974) 129.

⁵ Nigel Nicolson et al. eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III, 1923-1928* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1980) 400, cited by Lee, 503.

⁶ Anne Oliver Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III, 1925-1930* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1981)146-9.

⁷ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, “Virginia Woolf and the Age of Motor Cars,” in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 162.

The motorcar also elicits a different genre of writing from Woolf. Though she is not a travel-writer, a volume called *Travels with Virginia Woolf* has collected the diary entries, letters and fragments of essays written by Woolf during her journeys. In the introduction, editor Jan Morris remarks on the alimentary effect of travel on Woolf's usually despondent imagination:

Virginia's madness seldom shows [in this book], her resentments of gender are put aside... Virginia Woolf greatly enjoyed her journeys, home or away, and half a century after her death her pleasure remains with us, in these miscellaneous memoirs of movement and observation as a mostly merry legacy of a grand but tragic life.⁸

Travel, "movement," and "observation" are set against grandeur, tragedy, and "madness." Woolf's journeys are therapeutic for more than just her body; "[t]he car became in her mind a very engine of release, like travel itself perhaps."⁹ To Morris, traveling remains one of the simple, enduring pleasures of Woolf's "grand but tragic" life. Indeed, the "merry legacy" of travel is portrayed as the remnant salvaged from the generally depressing tone of the rest of Woolf's admittedly more important – but also somber – opus. Whatever the validity of Morris's claim, the writing that fills her collection is full of breezy wit. That Woolf in the epigraph describes owning a car as "an additional life" highlights how much the experience of motoring differs from her usual "stationary industry" of writing. Morris does not allow for Woolf to be a true travel-writer, but cites a "brightness and transience" in Woolf's "topographical writing" that is different from the introspective pursuit of Woolf's fiction.¹⁰ The writing one does while traveling observes others, while the craft of fiction – Woolf's stationary industry" – draws deeply from the self. The latter is also primarily a movement of the mind, not body. Indeed, in

⁸ Jan Morris, ed., *Travels with Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993) 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

contemplative moods Woolf's characters often forget the body, as Mr. Bankes forgets Mrs. Ramsay's. I am not assuming that physical movement displaces mental movement – but the mental movement that occurs simultaneously with physical motion has a different quality and texture. It is, as Morris says of Woolf's travel writing, bright and transient.

In chapter one, devices of unity leap across the staggering divide between oneself and the other person, between the present and the past. Perhaps in that search for interiority and the past are traces of the grandeur and tragedy Jan Morris sees in Virginia Woolf. Chapter two will examine a different model of the connection between human beings. Modern devices of transportation mediate the interaction between people in London. Woolf makes use of this device to sketch the tenuous yet essential links that bind the city in a web of relations. With cars, buses, airplanes and trains, Woolf connects disparate people by establishing them in mutual awareness of one another, tethering them into one contiguous body. The view on the world is made strange through the window of an automobile or within the confines of a moving train; as such, devices of transportation assert themselves in Woolf's literary project to restructure the social world of London, questioning the priority of intimate relationships and the boundaries of the subject.

I

Omnibuses, motorcars, hansoms, and other devices of transportation weave together layers of people and things in Virginia Woolf's London. *The Years*, one of Woolf's later realist novels, follows three generations of the Pargiter family in London from the late 1800s through the 1930s. Eleanor McNeese writes that “above all, *The Years* is a London novel...it records the changes in transportation, commerce, and street life as city noises shift... from Victorian London

to London of the 1930s.”¹¹ A 1937 review by Peter Monro Jack in the *New York Times* praises its sensitivity to place and time: “[I]ovely as *The Waves* was, *The Years* goes far behind and beyond it, giving its characters a local habitation and a name.”¹² Woolf herself comments in her diaries that *The Years* has “more “real” life in it; more blood and bone.”¹³ The descriptions of London – including those of transportation – locate Woolf’s characters in a specific time and place, imbuing them with a “local habitation and a name.” London at the turn of the twentieth century is not itself without the changing sounds made by the transportation; indeed, devices of transportation articulate a network that links people and things. When Eleanor Pargiter climbs on top of the omnibus,

She relaxed; she breathed in the soft London air; she heard the dull London roar with pleasure. She looked along the street and relished the sight of cabs, vans, and carriages all trotting past with an end in view...this was her world. She was in her element. (*TY* 89)

In this passage, Eleanor takes in the sights, smells, and sounds of the city in one synaesthetic whiff. When she feels herself “in her element” in London she describes seeing cars. The cars that move London also *make* London; they have become an indispensable part of the city. From her vantage atop the omnibus Eleanor feels herself a moving part of the city. Around her she perceives the other “cabs, vans, and carriages” moving in tandem, and she is tethered, made continuous with the city through her movement. This sense of community, of being “in one’s element” in the middle of London, then, is in large part mediated and enabled by devices of transportation. As these devices evolve through the novel, the primary way in which Londoners

¹¹ Eleanor McNeese, “Introduction,” in *The Years* (Orlando, Harcourt Books, 2008) lxx-lxxvi.

¹² Peter Monro Jack, “Virginia Woolf’s Richest Novel: in “the Years” Her Art Reaches its Fullest Development to Date,” *New York Times* 11 April 1937.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953) 263.

like Eleanor feel connected to and elemental of their city is constantly made anew. North Pargiter notes “[i]t was odd how soon one got used to cars without horses...they used to look ridiculous” (TY 235). Each new technology of transportation replaces the last one completely as the primary mode of interaction between a person and his city. The way that a single Londoner feels tethered to the body of the city is to join in its movement, with the devices of movement particular to that time.

The omnibus, as mediator of social interactions, also refigures the individual’s sense of his place among the people of the city. The historical London omnibus was a largely middle class conveyance that began operating in London in 1856.¹⁴ Eleanor, spinster and philanthropist, takes the omnibus across London to attend to her housing projects in the peripheral neighborhoods. On one particular trip, Eleanor returns home on the omnibus after winning an argument with one of the builders,

She cast a glance at her fellow-passengers. They all looked settled, elderly, as if their minds were made up. For some reason she always felt that she was the youngest person on an omnibus, but today, since she had won her scrap with Judd, she felt that she was grown up. (TY 95)

Eleanor sees her “fellow-passengers” on the omnibus as one collective body. All of them are united in looking “settled, elderly,” and purposeful as well, “as if their minds were made up” – though the only thing they share is a bus route, a collective movement in a collective space. Walter Benjamin writes, “[h]ere is something... characteristic of the big city... Before buses, railroads, and streetcars became fully established during the nineteenth century, people were never put in a position of having to stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without

¹⁴ Eleanor McNeese, “Introduction,” in *The Years* (Orlando, Harcourt Books), lxxv.

exchanging a word”.¹⁵ No words are exchanged, but minds are made up. The silent body of passengers forms the constant, unchangeable social landscape, and against their stoic regard Eleanor “always” feels like the “youngest person on an omnibus.” Her sense of self-progress and personal development comes from seeing her own status on the bus as “grown up” like everyone else, “settled” and determined. An omnibus offers the chance of self-reflection through comparison with the assumed social body.

The omnibus also allows the readers to see how Eleanor fits into the fabric of society by offering a view from a different perspective. To another’s eyes *she* is part of the social body. This paragraph follows immediately after Eleanor’s thoughts above.

The man whose toe she had trodden on sized her up; a well-known type; with a bag; philanthropic; well nourished; a spinster; a virgin; like all the women of her class, cold; her passions had never been touched; yet not unattractive. (TY 96)

The nameless man “size[s] [Eleanor] up”; his understanding, though based on appearances, is mostly accurate. She will remain a spinster, a virgin, and a philanthropist all of her life. Woolf reflects on the strange accuracy of surface impressions in her diary, writing “it has a slap dash and vigor sometimes hits and unexpected bull’s eye.”¹⁶ Indeed, the man’s evaluation of Eleanor as a “well-known type” is, though reductive, factually true. For him Eleanor fits into a particular stratum of his conception of London. We, as readers, are given the privilege of his perspective when the narrative voice slides from Eleanor to the nameless man as a bead would slide across the invisible thread that tethers them together. Eleanor steps off the bus almost immediately after that passage, and the narrative perspective travels with her, yet for this brief moment on the omnibus, it detaches itself from the tether of one mind to roam the compartment of the omnibus.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 191, cited by Caughie, xxvi.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953) 13.

Not only is London held together by the cars and omnibuses that trace its vast infrastructure, disparate perspectives of Londoners become contiguous through their mutual appraisal of one another on the very same cars and omnibuses. The brief moment that Eleanor shares with the nameless male passenger is a point of social contiguity.

In addition to mediating the interactions of strangers, devices of transportation also figure in the representation of intimate relationships. The random intrusions that occur on public transportation are evoked to portray the element of impersonality residing in deep personal friendships. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh, who Clarissa Dalloway almost married, visits her again years later and leaves from their meeting filled with thoughts of her that he cannot get rid of. “He was not in love with her any more! He only felt...unable to get away from the thought of her; she [keeps] coming back and back like a sleeper jolting against him in a railway carriage” (*MD* 76). Peter compares Clarissa’s persistent presence in his mind to the unintended physical intrusion of a fellow passenger, who, jolted in sleep by the random motion of the train, comes to rest in intimate repose against one’s shoulder. Strangers enact the elements of intimacy, by chance. By drawing this analogy, Peter Walsh recasts his relationship to Clarissa, a relationship with a history of deep attachment, in a situation reminiscent of Eleanor and the unnamed man on the omnibus. Peter does this perhaps to distance himself from Clarissa’s charm, and in so doing he points to the idea that personal history between two people, the times spent together in the distant past, distinguishes a lover from a random passenger. The “railway carriage,” as a literary device, provides a shared space and time for two people where intimacy and accidental touches of strangers are leveled. For when considered in the context of the moment, based only upon its surface appearance, there is no difference. The awareness of being together unites Peter and Clarissa; it also links complete strangers. “Woolf’s writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*,” writes Gillian

Beer, “suggested that the most fundamental form of connection between human beings is being alive in the same place at the same time, rather than the chosen friendships and love-affairs that fiction ordinarily privileges.”¹⁷ Beer’s “fundamental form of connection,” of “being alive in the same place at the same time” is the common denominator that remains consistent from mere acquaintance all the way to intimates. Peter and Clarissa have been, since their meeting that morning, re-established in the thoughts of each other as being “alive in the same place at the same time.” The fact of their contiguous existence is evocative of, or connected to, intimacy. This interchangeability between close acquaintance and stranger in the way they can both occupy the seat on bus next to one, dissolves the difference between stranger and intimate in the shared moment. Despite the depth, or the importance of certain relationships that make one privilege family and close friends over others, what tethers them at the root is that awareness of being alive at the same moment in London. Devices of technology bring the attention to this shared moment and are thus instrumental in how this particular form of human connection is represented.

II

Technological devices suggest a democratized, decentralized model of human interactions by focusing on the equalizing moment of encounter. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, this democratized contiguity exists alongside and in tension with a political and hierarchical model of social organization. Richard Dalloway, husband to Clarissa and a member of Parliament, reflects to himself that “he like[s] being ruled by the descendants of Horsa; he like[s] continuity; and the sense of handing on the tradition of the past” (*MD* 117). Monarchy has a linear and exclusive

¹⁷ Gillian Beer, “The Body of the People in Virginia Woolf: from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Waves*,” in *Virginia Woolf: the Common Ground* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) 48.

continuity, whereas devices of transportation present a non-linear, topographic sprawl and a network of connections. The scene in which a motor car backfires in the street outside Mulberry's flower shop juxtaposes the modes of mechanical and hierarchical organization.

Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's?...Everything had come to a standstill...The sun became extraordinarily hot because the motor car had stopped outside Mulberry's shop window; old ladies on the tops of the omnibuses spread their black parasols...Mrs. Dalloway...looked out with her little pink face pursed in inquiry. Everyone looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated... (*MD* 15)

The eye of the narrative pans over the street while individual heads turn toward the motionless car. Ostensibly the gaze of the Londoners is motivated by their curiosity and desire to glimpse the "Prince of Wales[]" or the "Queen[]" or the "Prime minister." Yet old ladies on omnibuses, the boys on their bicycles, Mrs. Dalloway at her shopping and Septimus Warren Smith are collected and their gaze organized by the conduits of transportation, infrastructure and commerce. Looking at the motorcar, people must look through the devices of technology, though sometimes these devices are so embedded as to be virtually transparent. The monarchical, political continuity that Richard Dalloway admires registers in the minds of Londoners only because it disrupts the system of transportation. Monarchy organizes by the power of ideals, the technology by its imbrications into daily life. Minow-Pinkney argues that the experience of riding in a motorcar "dissolves linear cohesion."¹⁸ Here the motorcar is involved in scrambling the linear progression of power through the social channels, as its very nature suggests a mechanical and architectural principle that underlies and supports hierarchical power. Just as the

¹⁸ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, "Virginia Woolf and the Age of Motor Cars," in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 162.

ownership of a car was once a social symbol and in time became a commonplace device of individual freedom, the motorcar is here a symbol of hierarchical authority in a time when technologies have even ordered the way in which that hierarchical authority is experienced and conveyed. Devices of technology not only affect sensory experience; they touch on the social sphere.

The skywriting scene that follows demonstrates that modes of mechanical tethering are at least *as* effective as, if not more effective than, the continuity held by monarchy in the form of the car with its shades drawn. As the motor car carrying the eminent public figure drives past the assembled crowd and through the gates of Buckingham Palace, an airplane cuts across the skies over London and begins to spell out letters in the sky. Amidst the confusion over what exactly the skywriter is trying to convey (much like the confusion over the identity of the important person passing in the motorcar), people are drawn to look.

All down the mall people were standing and looking up into the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent...then suddenly...the aeroplane rushed out of the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street, in Regent's park... away and away the aeroplane shot; soaring over Greenwich and all the masts, over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul and the rest... (*MD* 28)

The plane, touching on “the Mall,” “Green Park,” Regent’s Street, “St. Paul,” and the rest links a greater number of people in the act of looking than the local influence exerted by the motorcar in the example before. Melba Cuddy-Keane connects the invention of the wireless radio to this scene, writing that “the sound of the air plane is diffused from one point...but auscultized from a variety of positions...in the city implies the kind of expanded listening audience actualized with

the advent of broadcasting technology.”¹⁹ She goes on to argue that a “liberating aurality” inheres in the wireless broadcast, suggestive of “more pluralistic and participatory forms.”²⁰ A greater power of diffusion inheres in the airplane than the car, for the plane can reach the “expanded listening audience” of all London. Whereas the idea of royalty brings a city block together, indistinguishable letters written by the airplane in an advertisement garners the attention of tens of thousands. Cuddy-Keane uses “pluralism” in the quote above to denote the democratizing possibilities of the wireless, specifically that of accessing information that takes the very air for its medium. Of course, “pluralism” here could be also seen in another way, as the message that the plane is there to convey does not come across. Everyone who reads it sees something different. This is pluralism as a sort of anarchical, mutual disagreement. The new broadcasting technology, though it excels the more pedestrian modes for the number and range of its audience, has that inherent possibility of misinterpretation – if there had been any interpretation to begin with.

It is the airplane and the motorcar, rather than the message or person it conveys, that creates continuity by establishing the awareness of a shared space and time. Gillian Beer’s argument that the fundamental of human interaction lies in their being “alive in the same place at the same time” must be qualified in that people need to be *made aware* of their mutual, fortunate condition. People – and here the people of London - need a device that provides for this awareness of shared existence. The omnibus does this by throwing strangers together into one contained place. The airplane does this by broadcasting its message all over London. Within

¹⁹ “Auscultize (as opposed to focalize) would be the verb signifying the presentation of the sound as listened to; and auscultator (opposed to focalizer) would signify the person doing the listening.” More simply, the medical term used for when a doctor listens to your heart through a stethoscope. Quote from Melba Cuddy-Keane, “Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality,” in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 71.

²⁰Ibid, 94.

Mrs. Dalloway, the ringing of Big Ben operates in much the same way as it weaves through the narrative. “Big Ben was striking. The leaden circles dissolve in air,” repeats through the narrative trajectories of Clarissa, Peter Walsh, Richard Dalloway, and many others (*MD* 2, 46, 92, 184). It is not the abstract entity of Time that links people, but the sounding of time, the notification by the bells. The embodiment of time in the device of Big Ben rings out across London and alerts everyone to a shared temporality. In so doing these devices denotes to its “listening audience” their shared existence, in the same moment, on the same England. The simultaneity of perception created by the airplane and the clock invokes a widening of the world by its ability to tether greater number of perspectives.

By positioning everyone in simultaneous awareness of others in a shared space and time, the motorcar, airplane, and bell tower function as technological and literary devices of tethering. Liesl Olson writes, “the sky writing airplane, the prime minister’s motorcar, and the chiming of Big Ben, for instance, threads through each pedestrian’s personal narrative...[and] sharpens the profound relationship between the individual and a larger sense of shared humanity.”²¹ This “threading,” Olson argues, is intimately implicated in the portrayal of the “ordinary” in Woolf’s modernism.²² Indeed, Woolf had described *The Years* as a book about facts, not vision.²³ Interestingly enough, *The Years* was the only New York Times Bestseller among all Woolf’s books, though now it garners very little critical interest.²⁴ Olson’s use of the “ordinary” to explain the linkages in this chapter can also be reframed in terms of the technologies employed. Chapter one, which captures the less-ordinary life, deals with devices that attempt the impossible

²¹ Liesl Olson, “Virginia Woolf and the ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 60.

²² *Ibid.*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁴ Liesl Olson, “Virginia Woolf and the ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 64. A search on JSTOR of “Virginia Woolf” and “The Years” yields mostly reviews on biographies of Woolf, and very few articles dealing directly with this particular novel.

complete unity between one person and another. The technologies in this chapter, however, are ordinary technologies assimilated into “ordinary” life; they enable and facilitate “ordinary” existence. In the dichotomy of matter and spirit, these devices and what they evoke belong the realm of material and matter. Cars, bell towers, buses participate in the everyday life, rather than the artist’s visionary existence. In our present day, telephones *do* see and electric machines *can* bring us the voices of the past. They have become a part of our “ordinary,” though they may have been the “extraordinary” of another time. The “ordinary” is a shifting realm that keeps place with the rapid change of technologies.

III

The moment of mutual attention forms a tenuous link, one that is easily broken. Each component of that simultaneous attention is uncertain to persist into the next moment; therefore the mutuality is easily dismantled. In her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf describes meeting a woman on a train who makes Woolf “begin almost automatically to write a novel about her.” But the train has to stop – and Woolf the narrator watches as Mrs. Brown “disappear[s], carrying her bag, into that vast blazing station...and I have never seen her again, never know what became of her.”²⁵ The existence of the link depends on the device that has brought them together – here, the train. It is the nature of trains to reach their end point, and so the device that tethers two minds has the dissolution of that meeting built-in to it. Getting off the train, Mrs. Brown removes herself from sharing a space (the train compartment) and time with the narrator, who never hears from her again. The physical presence of the other is necessary for that linkage – this is another point that differs from chapter one.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984) 199.

Twice more in the essay Woolf repeats the necessary ending of their meeting. One must capture the spirit of Mrs. Brown before “the train stopped and she disappeared forever,” and before the ultimate end as “the train rush[es] to that station where we must all get out.”²⁶ The forces – here a matter of time tables and destinations – that put two people together will not last. Likewise, every community of our lives must disintegrate into component parts, if not sooner, then at the “station where we must all get out.” Interestingly and rather paradoxically, the moment is no longer ordinary if the chance of its being lost without any record seems to prove such an anxiety for Woolf. Though it is assembled by chance, the chance linkage takes on a precious quality; Mrs. Brown becomes the incarnation of human nature itself. Compared to the moments of vision in chapter one, this presents a focus that is radically different for its valuing of the present moment, for only in the present moment can one have access to the physical presence of the other person.

Mortality makes the ordinary encounters into something strange and unknown and worthy of attention. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily feels compelled by the sense of the inevitable end to attend to her art.

She could not shake herself free from the sense that everything this morning was happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time, as a traveler, even though his half-asleep, knows, looking out of the train window, that he must look now, for he will never see that town, or that mule cart, or that woman at work in the fields, again. (*TTL* 197)

Every moment in time is singular, never to be repeated, a step into the unknown. Henri Bergson writes, “if everything is in time, everything changes inwardly, and the same concrete reality

²⁶ Ibid., 209.

never recurs.”²⁷ Likewise Olson writes that “*Mrs. Dalloway* pivots on this experience of the ordinary as something strange, in that the ordinary always exists in a new moment of time.”²⁸ Indeed, tracing the use of the train as a literary trope within Woolf, one could find instances where ordinary reality dips into the strangeness of what it *is* – a “concrete reality” that “never recurs.” The train is suited to Woolf’s artistic purpose in that it captures both the ordinariness and the irretrievable nature of the moment, and perhaps that is why she reuses the image through her fiction and nonfiction. Her consistency in tying in certain themes and preoccupations with particular technological devices is indicative of how technological devices mediate her aesthetic sensibilities, as certain technologies become associated with certain moods.

Whereas the image of the train is associated with passing time, the trope of the motorcar evokes the idea of strange worlds never to be encountered again.

What I like...about motoring is the sense it gives one of alighting accidentally, like a voyager who touches the planet with the tip of his toe, upon scenes which would have gone on, have always gone on, will go on, unrecorded but for this chance glimpse.²⁹

The sense of strangeness is emphasized in this passage. The awareness of passing time is subordinated by the sense of how different “scenes” are in the spaces beyond one’s reach. The spatial freedom connected to “motoring” manifests in how, rather than observing the moment flying by while one sits helpless in the train carriage, the observer in the automobile becomes a “voyager,” able to strike out from the straight line of the railroad to investigate the hidden

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative evolution*, Trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover publications, 1998) 46, cited by Olson, 49.

²⁸ Liesl Olson, “Virginia Woolf and the ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 49.

²⁹ “21 August 1927,” Nigel Nicolson et al. eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf; Volume III, 1923-1928* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1980) 153.

corners of the world. The glimpses uncovered here, by a unique alignment of observer and observed, is in its irretrievability akin to the scenes flying outside the window of the train traveler. In both cases the anxiety lies in the moment going “unrecorded,” seen for the “first time” but also the “last time.” For the passenger in the railway train, time moves: that particular configuration of “town” and “mule cart” and “that woman at work” are irretrievable because they exist precisely at that moment in time. In the second, the voyager is a space traveler; where she alights is entirely a matter of chance, and never to be returned to again. The need to record these scenes serves as a final tethering of the fleeting moment to something material, something that cannot fade. Whether altered by space or by time, these two examples mark the instability of any social interaction, as the outside forces of time and space assail the connection between self and other. Thus, though devices of transportation tether, they do so under tenuous terms. The connections between people – strangers and intimates alike, from a community of two to the community of a whole city – are therefore also tenuous and unstable. Even Big Ben, which strikes on the hour and structures *Mrs. Dalloway* into hours, imparts to it both the stability of ordered time, and the urgency of its limited duration. Harold Bloom writes, “To speak of measuring one’s time by days or months, rather than years, has urgency, and this urgency increases when the fiction of duration embraces only hours, as Mrs. Dalloway does”³⁰

Limitations of our lives are intertwined with the devices that govern our experience of life.

IV

Technological devices mediate a tenuous tethering that not only destabilizes relationships but also the individual ego. In *The Years*, characters often question their own distinctness and

³⁰ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Virginia Woolf: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 2.

individuality when they step inside a moving vehicle. In 1907, “Maggie had been thinking something of the kind when the cab crossed the Serpentine...[s]he had been thinking, Am I that, or am I this? Are we one, or are we separate...something of the kind... ‘What is I?... ‘I’...’ ” (TY 131). In the 1930s, Peggy sits with Eleanor in a cab on their way to the family party that closes the book, “She was alone with Eleanor in the cab. And they were passing houses. Where does she begin, and where do I end? ” (TY 317). Sitting in a cab makes both Maggie and Peggy uncertain of the boundary of their bodies. Sharing a space, and a trajectory of movement brings into question distinctness and individuality. In the examples cited from Woolf’s diary and *To the Lighthouse*, a person in a moving vehicle loses the outer trappings of their identity and becomes merely “a traveler” or “a voyager” when they go aboard.

As an observer, one begins to feel a certain permeability of the ego, which is perhaps why these questions are brought up. A similar de-stabilization takes place where it becomes possible, by wandering the streets of London, to be simultaneous oneself and not oneself. The lack of unity does not only exist within the social bodies, but carries into the individual self as well. The urban topography of the London streets here provides the field of tethering that induces permeability around the person. In her essay “Street Haunting,” Woolf writes of the effect of shutting the door to one’s room, and venturing out into London on a winter night.

When the door is shut on us...the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all those wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness...the eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure...the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks...content still with surfaces only.
(CE4, 156)

Using “we” for the observing (almost Emersonian) eye rambling the streets of London, Woolf suggests the augmentation not only of her own, but of the identity of all those who would attempt this “street haunting.” The “we” used blurs the line between the reading and writing consciousnesses on this “adventure,” a blurring that will carry to herself and the people she meets on the streets. First “the door is shut,” and one is freed from the habits and rooms that contain personal idiosyncrasies to become only an observer, an eye. The “oyster of perceptiveness” separates out from the “wrinkles and roughnesses” and takes to the streets. The eye tethers briefly with the people and objects it meets with, but being “content...with surfaces” it does not seek after depths or insight. Zwerdling writes, “the ‘eye’ in this passage is I think meant to be read as the antithesis of ‘I.’ For the self could be a prison...”³¹ In a way, physical movement limits the depth of mental involvement, yet surface observation does not completely obliterate the “I.” Breaking out of the “prison” of self is only temporary, a brief forgetting of ego as one turns outward to receive the world. By the insistence on the moment of encounter, street haunting disregards personal history, the memory that so wholly comprise the I, and limits the “I” to only one function, that of the observing consciousness. Because of its constant engagement in observation, the eye and the “I” are tethered to the other people met upon the roads of wintry London. It allows a brief escape from one’s own life by tethering it to the lives of others. As Woolf writes of those she meets upon the street,

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few moments the bodies and minds of others...and what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality... (*CE4*, 165)

³¹ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 13.

Walking the streets of London, self-identity is unsettled by the “illusion” of being able to escape the self and “put on briefly” like a cloak the “bodies and minds of others.” The personality is not a “straight line,” but a topographical web like the interlocking linked paths of London streets; the story of one’s own life is not a forward one-way road, but a place, a “habitation”, with innumerable possibilities simultaneously contained within it. It even has other beings dwelling there, and past versions of oneself. Hermione Lee writes, “London was [Woolf’s] own past, which she traced and retraced, meeting her previous selves as she went. It unsettled identity, turned her from a writer, wife, sister, aunt, friend, woman, into an unobserved observer.”³² The language of street haunting brings back the “voyager alighting on a distant planet,” the planet here being England. And those aliens are Londoners, neighbors who have lived lives simultaneously with our own. Indeed those aliens become a part of oneself, a character one might take on, just as “writer, wife, aunt, friend, woman” are all characters taken on by the “observer.”

The “threading” of subjectivities is accomplished by devices that make disparate people aware of their shared existence. With the thread of awareness, the self takes on a quality of permeability; the eye and the “I” both open up. The passage from *A Room of One’s Own*, where the “girl in patent leather boots” and the “young man in a maroon overcoat...got into the taxi” and the “unity of mind” that restores the “unity of mind” to the narrator is an image that involves a combination of these themes. The permeability of egos upon a device of transportation is made materially manifest as man and woman step into one cab and fuse into a symbol of the androgynous, hybrid mind. The material permeability of the person as he or she enters the flow of London is also present in Clarissa Dalloway’s thought, “that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things here, then, she survived” (*MD* 7). One survives by

³² Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) 545.

imparting a little of one's own substance into the streets, leaving the trace of one's existence amidst the flow of life.

This chapter examines how embedded technologies change how people understand their relations to one another and to their city in Woolf's fiction. Woolf responds to devices of transportation by crafting an aesthetic that tethers disparate people in the city of London into a plurality. The linkage is based on the moment of encounter, on the physical presence, and the devices involved are the ordinary omnibuses, and motorcars that course through the streets of London. These tenuous conditions for linkage make for a fleeting bond, and the preciousness of the present moment turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. Into the stream of London life, one may release the history, failures and successes that accrue over a life time. A diary entry written a few weeks before Woolf's death reads "I mark Henry James's sentence: Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable."³³ The serviceability of observation perhaps lies entirely in the escape from the self; perhaps it is this displacement of Woolf's concerns that Morris saw and capitalized upon when she wrote her introduction.

³³ "Saturday 8 March 1941," Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *A Moment's Liberty: the Shorter Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: the Hogarth Press, 1990) 503.

CONCLUSION

MOVING TOWARD STILLNESS

Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life?
 Something one can lay hands on and say, this is it... I'm looking; but that's not it
 – that's not it? What is it? And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking
 through Russell Square last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds;
 and the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of
 something there, which is "it" ... It is that the thing is in itself enough:
 satisfactory; achieved.³⁴

- *Diary, Saturday 27 February 1926*

Midway through this thesis I yielded to the temptation of writing again to Ursula K. LeGuin, if only to see her response to the idea that Virginia Woolf had a penchant for science fiction. She wrote back (again to my surprise), this time with a challenge: "The next people you will have to prove were science fictionally inclined are Shelley + Housman."³⁵ This makes me think, what, other than for the pure pleasure of finding patterns, would be the point of proving that Shelley and Housman are science fictionally inclined? Indeed, what is the point of suggesting that Virginia Woolf is science fictionally inclined? All writers to some extent live in a technological world; some of them ignore the implications of those technologies blissfully, and others turn these technologies into tools of the imagination.

³⁴ Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *A Moment's Liberty: the Shorter Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: the Hogarth Press, 1990) 207.

³⁵ Ursula K. LeGuin. Letter to the author. 15 March 2010.

This thesis looks for the glue that holds vision and material together, for the links that tie people to one another and to their world. Through much of Woolf's writing, technological devices are that glue (or at least, one form of that glue). In her fiction, these devices structure the experience of the ordinary life as well as the visionary. Woolf's fiction is not science fiction, though there is a resemblance between the two that lies in a similar movement of mind, in the desire to know the other. Harold Bloom, in the introduction to his collection of critical essays on Ursula K. LeGuin, writes, "no one else now among us matches [LeGuin] at rendering freely that image of the thing we cannot see."³⁶ Likewise the first chapter chronicles Virginia Woolf's attempts to see "the thing we cannot see" – not an alien, but merely the person beside oneself. Or to rephrase, the desire to meet the alien is in fact, Lily's desire to understand Mrs. Ramsay, to access that inaccessible interiority of the other person. For both LeGuin and Woolf, the quest to seeing clearer and deeper becomes, in the end, a question of seeing with words. Woolf employs technological devices to shake us out of the complacency of ordinary seeing and, through new and fantastical insights, adopt novel relations with the object. Even though words are not as self-evident as pictures are, they can be repositories of other subjectivities; they can contain the mood and the rhythm of other personalities. What emerges in the effort to see the thing unseen, to counter this myopia of the mind is a vision – a fiction – of unity, and a necessary one.

In chapter two argues that embedded technological devices structure the way people relate to one another in Woolf's writing. The fundamental element of human relations is exemplified by the scenes one encounters in a motorcar, by the people one meets on an omnibus, and by the airplane that flies overhead. Technology affects how we understand our link to the

³⁶ Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Ursula K. LeGuin: Modern Critical Perspectives* (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2000) 12.

world. These linkages even blur the boundaries of the individual – and Woolf found great use and relief in the self-forgetting it allowed.

Vision of unity and connection is hard earned in both cases. The desire and movement toward unity and connection is ceaseless. One type of unity is centered in the mind and the vision, while the other is based in the material body and in things. But Woolf, that “restless searcher,” seeks community in both arenas. There is of course, a third option, the option of no movement, of stillness. Francois Mauriac called Virginia Woolf one of the writers who “are moving towards silence.”³⁷ And it is silence, stillness, and the suspension of all movement that is not included in this thesis. Perhaps that is the answer to all the riddles of unity – instead of moving in either body or mind, to simply be still. But perhaps that answer would obliterate these novels and letters and essays, so full of momentum with their passionate search for connection. To end then, after a long explication of movement with the idea of stillness: or as the epigraph puts it, that “the thing in itself is enough: satisfactory; achieved.”

³⁷ Francois Mauriac, *Mémoires Intérieurs*, trans. Gerald Hopkins (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960) 101, cited by Lee, 478.

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