THE VIEW FROM NO ONE: WOOLF, JOYCE, AND THE PROBLEM OF MATERIALISM IN MODERNIST FICTION

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Many forms of materialism, new and old, have lately offered highly visible avenues of critical and historical inquiry in modernist studies and in literary studies in general; there may now be as many materialisms as there are ideological ills in want of remedy. This dissertation takes as its point of departure a historical and intellectual discrepancy between the contemporary revival of materialism in the humanities and the prominent and typically explicit anti-materialism of modernist writers and artists, with particular attention to the fictions of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Modernist aesthetic and intellectual culture, I argue, can be seen as staging materiality as a crucial site for complex negotiations of modernity, technology, selfhood, and the artwork. I explore how this negotiation unfolds in the space, and occasionally at the limits, of the novel. In these terms, I explain how the vocal anti-materialism of Woolf belies her fascination with the narrative figuration of materiality. My argument shows that this figuration is typically invested *not* in objects, things, or materials available to everyday experience, but in a non-phenomenological core of

material being that can only be imagined as a force of erasure, destruction, loss, and finitude.

I suggest that for Woolf, and for Joyce in a much different way, it is only a "view from no one" of disembodied spectatorship or eyeless sight that might be adequate to materiality in this sense. In readings of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, I show how this insight provokes a literary crisis embodied in the problem of materialism, which will appear to be the novel's death sentence and its hopes for renewal at the same time.

My reading of the "Ithaca" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* departs from standard interpretations of Joycean materiality. I suggest that the problem of materialism in Joyce lies at the crux of a conception of the literary artwork existing between total idealization (the figure of the encyclopedia) and the extinction to which ideality is finally exposed. I propose that the genuine Joycean figure of materiality may be located in this aesthetic oscillation between knowledge and its erasure.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aaron F. Hodges was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. He received his B.A. in Literature from Duke University in 2003 and his M.A. in Comparative Literature from Cornell University in 2007.

While studying at Cornell, Dr. Hodges was awarded two Sage Fellowships and was the recipient of a Mellon Humanities Dissertation Writing Group grant. Between 2005 and 2012, he was an instructor for the Department of Comparative Literature and the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines. During that time, he also served as a teaching assistant for the English Department and a reader for the Government Department. In 2011, he was Lecturer in the Department of English at Wells College.

Dr. Hodges has presented his research at numerous conferences and forums. He was a leading organizer for several Cornell Theory Reading Group conferences, and co-organizer of a seminar on "Form and Genesis in Philosophy and Literary Studies" at the 2011 conference of the American Comparative Literature Association in Vancouver, BC. He has been a panelist at ACLA conferences on several occasions, most recently at New York University in March 2014. He has presented at the conference of the German Studies Department at Cornell, and was invited to speak at a German Department colloquium on Kant's philosophy of history.

Dr. Hodges's work has been published in *CR: The New Centennial Review* and *Science and Society*. His dissertation, *The View from No One: Woolf, Joyce, and the Problem of Materialism in Modernist Fiction,* was supervised by Dr. Neil Saccamano.

In memory of

Alan Andrew Young-Bryant

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scholar, and his incomprehensible loss has made the world a less interesting place. I will never forget the countless late nights spent in Alan's company, the ways he expressed excitement at some new discovery or relished a turn of phrase, his intelligence, his generosity and his hospitality. Alan, you are in all respects a true friend, and I miss you.

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CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE AND THE IDEA OF MATERIALISM

A recent issue of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, as reliable as any barometer of intellectual fashion in literary and cultural studies, features an eight-page section of five articles grouped under the heading "Cluster on Textual Materialism." Bill Brown, whose own scholarship has in large part motivated the recent fixation on representations of things and objects in the study of modernism, introduces the series of articles (on the poetics of Burma-Shave signs and "postwar typewriting culture," among other subject matters) with a brief exposition of the – apparently contradictory – notion of "textual materialism."[1] The latter, writes Brown, is characterized by "an attention to the artifactuality of texts," that is, by an interpretive relationship towards the physical embodiment of the instantiation of a literary text (Brown 24-5). What interests a materialist of this stripe is therefore less the ostensibly "literary" aspect of any work of literature than the manner in which that work comes to exist uniquely in space and time, and the way in which that existence ought somehow to be given special attention or precedence in discussions of literary meaning.

[1] Brown, Bill. "Introduction: Textual Materialism." *PMLA* 125.1 (2010): 24–28

Why is textual materialism an apparently contradictory notion? As Brown himself notes, materialism in literary studies must above all reckon with the mode of existence of literary objects as such. It was Nelson Goodman's discussion in *Languages of Art* that provided the *locus classicus* for a classification of the nature of literary objects; this discussion would continue in the work of, among others, Arthur Danto and Gérard Genette.[2] Without reiterating the various debates and qualifications internal to this discussion, we can say broadly speaking that the existence of a literary text is in no small part *ideal* rather than material. In Goodman's terms, literature is an "allographic" rather than an "autographic" art – which means, among other things, that a novel or a poem cannot be counterfeited, only correctly or incorrectly reproduced. Whereas a painting exists autographically in its sensuous and material individuality (its copies, reproductions, fakes, or forgeries may be more or less accurate *as* copies but can never become or replace the "original" work), a literary text is not bound to this or that particular sensuous individual or physical manifestation, copy, or edition. Thus Brown cites Goodman remarking of multiple copies of the same literary work that "differences between them in style or size of script or type, in color of ink, in kind of paper, in number and layout of pages, in condition, etc., do not matter. All that matters is what may be called *sameness of spelling*: exact

[2] Cf. Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976. Goodman provides an indispensable foundation for subsequent discussions, in the philosophy of art, about the ontology of the artwork in general and of the literary object in particular. See, e.g., Arthur Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (1981) and Gérard Genette's two-part study comprising *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (1994) and *The Aesthetic Relation* (1997).

correspondences as sequences of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks" (Goodman 115). According to Goodman, in other words, "both identity of language and syntactic identity within the language are necessary conditions for identity of a literary work" (209); these are the necessary conditions not for what a work *means*, but for what it *is*.

For a brief and straightforward example, consider Ezra Pound's 1913 imagist quasi-haiku, "In a Station of the Metro."

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black, bough.

This sequence of fourteen words and the essential formal element that is the line break between the eighth and ninth words (which is to say that the same order of words with a different pattern of lineation would not be the same poem; the line break has a quasi-syntactic function according to the identity criteria formulated by Goodman above) are, in the strict sense, the necessary and sufficient conditions of the poem's existence. Whether that sequence is made manifest in faded black ink in Pound's own notebook, in bright pink spray-paint graffiti on the wall of a metro station, or on an online webpage dedicated to the "Men of 1914," the identity of the poem remains intact. If the physical manifestation of the poem is not identical with this ideal sequence of letters – if the webpage were to display "The apparition of the faces in a crowd; / Petals on wet *and* black bough;" if the subway vandal had written "The apparition of *this facss* in the crowd; / Petals on a wet black *bow*), then what is

inscribed is not "in a Station of the Metro" but another poem that in these cases are recognizably mistaken deviations from the ideal text. As Genette will say, such reproductions are not unfaithful, only incorrect. Finally, the poem continues to exist when Pound's notebook is lost in a fire, when the municipal authority blasts spray-paint away with jets of water, and when the administrator of the "Men of 1914" website deletes it in favor of an homage to Bloomsbury. This holds in principle for all works of literature. The text that constitutes *Ulysses* is indifferent to the sensuous (or, in Brown's terms, "artifactual") qualities of *this* copy of *Ulysses* sitting on the shelf in Cornell University's Olin Library. Of course, one can and should investigate and debate *which* text does indeed constitute *Ulysses*, and this is a debate about the correct sequence of words and sameness of spelling: should, for example, the telegraph that called Stephen Dedalus, like the young Joyce himself, back to Ireland read "MOTHER DYING COME HOME FATHER" or "NOTHER DYING COME HOME FATHER?" Ultimately, whether the first edition published by the Egoist Press in London in October 1922 or the critical reconstruction edited by Hans Walter Gabler that appeared in 1984 – or any other past or future edition – is the "correct" *Ulysses* is a legitimate matter of historical dispute, but this dispute still applies to the ideal sequence of words. The Gabler edition is, like any text, not a single particular copy but is embodied in all copies that adopt exactly the same word order and spelling.

How, then, can Brown *grant* the ineradicably ideal existence of works of literature and still say that "for the textual materialist, size matters, style matters, color matters" (Brown 25)? Why is the peculiar "materiality" of this or that text worth developing entire theoretical and critical methodologies around? How, specifically, do explicitly non-textual qualities of printed matter like size, style, or color matter? The critical stakes of textual materialism appear to lie, for Brown, in the "critical act of rematerializing the medium," (26) which means giving a special interpretive status to the material composition or manifestation of texts – Brown here cites, among others, Jerome McGann, who in *Textual Conditions* calls for a "materialist hermeneutics" whose objects would include "ink, paper, type-faces, bindings, book prices, and page format" (26).[3]

It nevertheless remains unclear just how the "materialism" of textual materialism ought to be understood. After all, the "critical act of rematerializing" invoked and celebrated by Brown is only intelligible against a background commitment to the ideality of literary texts. How is this so? First and foremost, because the literary critic necessarily proceeds with a concept of the object of criticism. In other words, we either implicitly or explicitly understand what sorts of objects are plausibly available to interpretation using the means and methods of literary criticism. This concept may be more or less flexible, and can always be put to

[3] Cf. McGann, Jerome. *The Textual Condition.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. pp. 13-15.

the test or revised in the encounter with limit cases (in the sphere of plastic arts, Marcel Duchamp's readymades come to mind, having by now been somewhat paradoxically institutionalized as the exemplary limit case), or by expansions in the institutional ideal of criticism as a discipline (especially in the wake of a notion of "theory" that, for better or worse, tends to level the generic differences between its objects: poetry, film, philosophical texts, architecture, and television sitcoms are all equally interpretable from the standpoint that wishes grasp, say, cultural signification as such or the reproduction of ideology in general). The concept of the object of criticism might even be confused or vague, in practice: it is without doubt possible to produce an interpretation of a poem like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" without holding any particular explicit views about the "literariness" of poetry, just as it is possible to read a novel and understand it as a work of fiction without paying any special attention whatsoever to its (or its genre's) peculiar marks of fictionality, realist conventions, and so on.

All the same, we understand perfectly well that some objects are *implausible* candidates for literary analysis and interpretation: very obvious examples include the chemical components of sedimentary rocks in eastern Tennessee, the existence of Bose-Einstein condensates, the evolution of limbic systems in humans, and the presence of life on Mars. Certainly there are distinct and identifiable historical and institutional reasons why it happens to be the case that literary critics do not interpret phase states of matter or the evolutionary appearance of the amygdala, but logical

priority ought to be accorded to the *formal* reason, that is, the mere fact that we are able to differentiate literary objects (and literary "materiality") from all other sorts of objects and all other species of materiality.[4] For one thing, we know that literary objects are linguistic in a special manner, and as critics we presume (in fact, as a logical prerequisite of criticism) that their language is *about* something or other – even if a work is, hypothetically, "about nothing," the critic would hasten to add that it is also about being about nothing. And, as Danto says of the constitutive distinction between "mere real things" and works of art, "things, as a class, lack aboutness just because they are things" (Danto 3). Sedimentary rocks are not about anything in this sense; we might say of a piece of sandstone that it exists because of the properties of various silicate minerals (mostly quartz) that compose it, in combination with readily identifiable environmental factors, but we would not go on to say that the sandstone is "about" the interaction of minerals with their environment.[5] This may seem like a banal point, but it is the background capacity to differentiate the literary from the non-literary that muddies the methodological waters for textual materialism; this

[4] The formal explanation has logical priority over the historical and the institutional ones because they, too, depend on the differentiation between literary and non-literary objects. Danto makes a similar argument when attempting a definition of the artwork; saying that an object is an artwork because it is recognized as such by the "artworld" (Danto has in mind the institutional theory of art articulated by George Dickie) "leaves unexplained, even if it can account for why such a work as Duchamp's *Fountain* might have been elevated from a mere thing to an artwork, why that particular urinal should have sustained so impression a promotion, while other urinals, like it in every obvious respect, should remain an ontologically degraded category" (Danto 5).

[5] This doesn't mean that I cannot adopt an aesthetic relation to a piece of sandstone, but doing so would entail that I actually set aside considerations of the various qualities of its material – its being composed of quartz particles, or the presence of elements like iron that explain its particular shade of red – and attend to its mere appearing. This is an argument that I do not spell out in detail here; it depends on the idea that aesthetic experience is not somehow pre-conceptual. For a recent treatment of the "aesthetics of appearing" that presents a perspicacious account of the relation between conceptuality and the aesthetic, cf. Seel, Martin. *The Aesthetics of Appearing*. trans. John Farrell. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005.

differentiation has nothing to do with paper, ink, or the technologies of bookbinding (which, like sandstone, are not really about anything[6]) but pertains to ideal orders of words and their formal properties.

In fact, only this prior commitment to literary ideality could lend the critic's appeal to materiality the special rhetorical or argumentative force it so often wants to access: to talk about the materiality of sandstone or of ancient water deposits on Mars, on the other hand, means very little. Emphasizing their materiality (or hypothetical materiality) amounts only to saying that they exist, whereas existence claims about literary texts, we saw, have little if anything to do with either their physical features or their factual existence in space and time. Consider a hypothetical scenario envisioned by Genette in which a researcher copies a handwritten letter composed by Napoleon: "he attentively *reads*" the document and transcribes it, an act for which "ideal textual identity is all that matters." A master forger, on the other hand, proceeds quite differently: "he would not only imitate the great man's handwriting, but would also provide himself with identical paper of the same type, ink of the same color, etc." It is a fact of exceptional importance that "the forger could do his work *without knowing how to read*" (Genette 1997, 53). It is correct to say that the researcher and the forger are

[6] Some might object that a writing technology like ink can certainly be interpreted in light of the cultural practices, objects, rituals, ideologies, etc., that become historically or factually associated with it, but this criterion of "aboutness" allows a simple and concrete distinction to be drawn between the ink itself, which is not about anything, and the cultural, economic, or historical networks in which it is situated as a technology. An even more straightforward example is the difference between "blackness" as such and a canvas covered in black oil, which we could say is about its own blackness, flatness, monochromism, and so forth.

dealing with two *distinct* objects: one can be read, the other cannot. The notion of a "materialist hermeneutics" must invoke an object of interpretation (or else it could not be a hermeneutics in the strict sense), but insofar as it aims to comprehend works of literature, it rests on a kind of category error: it confuses what can *only* be read with what literally cannot be read. A genuinely hermeneutic approach to literature would at the very least need to contend with arguments of the sort adduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who writes that

> "the written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so depending on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity. The remnants of past life – what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves – are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition, once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. In it time and space seem to be superseded" (Gadamer 156).[7]

[7] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum, 2004.

Gadamer goes on to say, in one of the more programmatic statements of *Truth and Method*, that "every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other texts that requires understanding, and this understanding has to be acquired" (*ibid.* 157). Now, we can surely bracket Gadamer's quasi-mystical remarks on the "secret art" of transforming the dead, external matter of writing into ideal meaning (which surely alludes to the Kantian doctrine of schematism that explains the synthesis of pure concept with empirical intuitions according to a similarly "hidden art"). We ought likewise avoid the thorny path that would be opened by investigation into the putatively "metaphysical" stakes of the relation in this passage between writing and the living presence of "total contemporaneity and familiarity." Nevertheless, the basic thrust of Gadamer's point is correct (and accepting it as correct surely does not commit one to accepting or evaluating the entirety of Gadamer's hermeneutic theory of literature or his explanation of how hermeneutic understanding is in fact to be acquired): the word is irreducibly more than its material support and because of this we cannot help but understand words on a page in a different way than we would randomly distributed blots of ink on a page. It is a more or less straightforward inference to say that a contemporary English speaker understands the word "faces" in the same way that Ezra Pound and his readers would have in 1913, whereas a hypothetical strange pattern of ink in a Pound manuscript that the latter privately intended as an obscure symbol for "face" or "crowd" could never been understood in the same way. Even if this peculiar smear were decoded by a feat of philological

excavation, the reader's relation to the blot and to the word "faces" remains revealingly distinct. What, then, could a materialist hermeneutics be if its materialism renders untenable or impracticable its claim to interpretation?

This basic difference between our cognitive or perceptual relation to words as opposed to things may not matter for the historian, because the contents of graves, the development of ink, the prices of books, and the contents of literary works can each ground inferences in the domain of historical knowledge. Daniel Lord Smail, for instance, has written a stimulating critique of the dominant assumptions of historiography with respect to the "deep time" of Paleolithic "prehistory." Smail proceeds by arguing for a history based on the analysis of "traces" rather than exclusively documents and artifacts that bear marks of conscious intention and hence restrict the purview of academic history to the time after the invention of writing. Smail's understanding of the trace is in this respect similar to that of Jacques Derrida, because it denotes simply "anything that encodes some sort of information about the past" (Smail 48-9);[8] one of the basic goals of his argument is to revise what (*qua* trace) can count as evidence for historical knowledge. Thus, he says, "documents bearing intended meanings cannot be seen as qualitatively superior to nondocumentary traces. Nor are the intended meanings superior to the word-sediment that figures in every written document. To acknowledge the importance of all forms of sedimentary traces

[8] Smail, Daniel Lord. *On Deep History and the Brain*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2008. Cf. pp. 40-73 *et passim.*

is to collapse the distinction between intentional and unintentional preservations that history in the Rankean vein – history that sought to decode the meanings of authors – had so carefully erected" (65). As we have seen, however, this is a perspective unavailable to literary studies: it cannot treat all traces as *prima facie* qualitatively equal simply because it has restricted its attention to those objects that for whatever reason are thought to deserve the predicate "literary." Literary critics are not in a position to revise so radically what can count for them as evidence, because only some traces are literary; the critic cannot argue that "nondocumentary traces" like DNA or archaeological artifacts ground her inferences just as well or just in the same way as does the poem or the novel, *if* the latter are objects she wishes to interpret.

But what about the appeal, not the materiality of the text or the work, but of its conditions? This appeal might try to circumvent the arguments stemming from Goodman about the ideal, allographic reproducibility of the text by insisting upon a form of historical materiality that provide demonstrable, extra-textual reasons for a work's being the way that it is. Stephen Kern refers, for example, to the "material foundation" of technological innovation at the root of "distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space" in *fin de siècle* European culture.[9] Thus the conflict between private and public time that takes place in works by Conrad, Kafka, or Joyce can in principle be understood in terms of the

[9] Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. p. 1

standardization of time made materially possible by the development of the wireless telegraph (13).[10] Adopting a similar strategy, one might argue that in order to interpret a poem like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," we ought to identify the material conditions for the creation or the production of the poem – perhaps via a history and analysis of public transportation around the time of the construction of the Métro de Paris between 1900 and 1913, when the poem was composed. Indeed, one could argue, this short poem cannot be fully understood absent a historical account of the modernization of urban transportation that makes it possible, the qualitatively new experience of waiting for a train amidst new modes of urban density and city life, and so on. Or, one might argue that the poem, as "imagist" experiment, must be understood in light of the technologies and media of photography or cinema and the new regimes of vision and perception that the latter were constructing around the turn of the century. The poem certainly effects a syntactic effort at a unification of the poetic and the visual – foregoing the linguistic device of comparison via simile by proposing that those nameless pale faces lined one-by-one are not *like* petals, but just "are" petals on a black bough, and its extreme compression of the temporality of reading or speaking poetry might be taken together as important clues to just how deeply it is indebted to photographic and cinematic forms of visual representation.

[10] To be fair, Kern wishes to avoid what he calls a "monocausal technological determinism" which he more or less successfully manages to accomplish. More useful to the account developed in this chapter is his vocabulary of "material foundations," by which he means concrete technological developments like cinema and the X-ray.

We could proliferate these sorts of readings, perhaps indefinitely: and that indefiniteness is precisely what introduces a troubling problem for the appeal to a text's necessary material conditions or foundations. According to this appeal, poems like Pound's could not have been composed in precisely the same manner under different historical and material circumstances, since that is just the meaning of "condition;" if construction on the Métro had not been completed until 1925, Pound obviously could not have written his poem in 1913. Perspicacious analysis of these material conditions, then, ought supposedly to teach us just how to interpret the poem. Claims of this sort look *prima facie* defensible, but they conceal a difficult methodological problem for the critic who conceives materialism too strictly in the invocation of the explanatory force of necessary conditions. Because any particular poem undeniably has innumerable conditions that could by rights be called material and necessary, it becomes necessary to discriminate between apparently different orders or levels of necessity. This discrimination, though, is logically inadmissible: a condition is either necessary or not, so it makes no sense to say that one condition is "more necessary" than any other. But how could the appeal to material conditions or foundations avoid this path?

There is an obvious sense in which the construction of the Métro provides the word "metro" in the title of Pound's poem with semantic content: that is, if the word "metro" weren't part of the English language, it wouldn't have any intelligible meaning. In fact, the word entered the language soon after construction finished

on the Paris Métro, though the Oxford English Dictionary gives an obsolete definition of "metro," dating from the early 17th century, meaning "a metrical poem or verse" (OED, "metro, n.2"). Couldn't we pursue this sort of analysis for any intelligible word in the poem? The modern meaning of "crowd," for example, as "a large number of persons gathered so closely as to press upon or impede each other" or as "the people who throng the streets in popular centres" (*OED*, "crowd, n.3," 1a, 2b) also enters the language during a determinate historical timeframe, and it is not too difficult to speculate about the historical, social, or economic reasons why a word that can denote "masses" or "multitude" would acquire common usage. Or, beyond mere speculation, one could investigate biological, ecological, climatological, or ethological studies of group-formation patterns on the European continent, which patterns are no doubt related in some distant fashion to modern crowds of people waiting for trains. Obviously, though, knowledge of those reasons is a prerequisite neither for correct usage nor apt understanding of the word "crowd." It is clear, at least, that introducing the language of "conditions" has at least the potential to remove interpretation far afield of its object; even if it is unobjectionable to say that the existence of the Paris Métro – or, even more generally, the phenomenon of crowding in urban spaces – affects or inhabits the meaning of "In a Station of the Metro," it is more difficult to successfully argue that the early settlement of Paris or the invention of tunneling technology can

explain what the poem is about. Surely these are material foundations or even necessary conditions of the poem? Yes, but equally necessary are the existence of the English language, the invention of writing, the evolution of language (not to mention consciousness), and the accretion of the Earth. This explains why the critic who speaks of necessary conditions or foundations (as part of a strategy to import philosophical materialism into literary studies) seems forced to introduce different orders of necessity, perhaps by arguing that although the Paris Métro is one among many conditions of "In A Station of the Metro," it is certainly more historically *proximate* to the poem than is, say, the early settlement of Paris. This is not a bad solution, but it is not an especially useful one, either. It succeeds only in obscuring the methodological obstacles that confront the appeal to materialism – here the epistemological impracticability of the appeal to material conditions as explanations of textual meaning. As we have seen, after all, talk about conditions only verifies that the poem is a successful linguistic performance: its words and its syntax are intelligible to any English-speaking reader. But those conditions are therefore ostensibly the same for non-poetic linguistic performances, as well. It is not at all clear that they could be employed to explain the difference between Pound's poem and an email from a friend in Paris which reports that "the Métro was crowded today." And, again, while this distinction may not be relevant to the historian, it is a presupposition of the literary critic.

This should not be taken as a recommendation against historically-inflected literary scholarship. If anything, critics need to ask exactly what "history" means within the confines of literary analysis and interpretation, and in particular what kinds of historical evidence can ground interpretive inferences with respect to works of literature.[11] After all, we know that history is not immediately given to reflection as a sheer chronicle of facts and events; rather, it owes its existence to forms of narration that depend on intricate notions of cause, rupture, continuity, experience, and truth. No modern critic will be ignorant of these basic issues; nevertheless, the appeal to history or to historical conditions ought to be able to address the problems outlined above. Failing that, it seems to leave the distinction between historical objects (which includes works of literature, but also ruins, eyewitness testimonies, artifacts, and perhaps even DNA) and literary objects (which objects are more than their artifactual support) unobserved, and consequently can't say why the knowledge it purports to gain from the examination of literature is different in kind or degree from knowledge it gains from the excavation of ancient tombs. It seems more prudent, in any case, to reverse the order of explanation by asking how an abstract notion like "history"

[11] I note in passing that the use of the terms "ground" or "grounding" are regularly employed but not always clarified with respect to the interpretation and comparison of literary works. A detailed discussion of this language in literary criticism is clearly beyond the scope of the present argument. As a matter of clarification, I note that here and elsewhere "ground" is intended to mean "reason," such that the clause "ground interpretive inferences" is more or less equivocal with "give reasons for plausible interpretations." The formulation here remains question-begging as long what counts as a "reason" remains open; I nevertheless proceed according to the assumption that there is a difference between plausible and implausible interpretations. In fact, this assumption is easy to validate as a premise; one only needs to suggest hypothetical "bad" interpretations (e.g., that "In a Station of the Metro" is a poem about a tree with hundreds of tiny faces) in order to show that there is indeed a difference between plausible and implausible interpretations, even while leaving undetermined the criteria by which to mark the difference.

becomes a concept, an object, or a problem within fictional narrative discourse. This strategy – one recommended and practiced in the readings of Woolf and Joyce that follow – can better accommodate reflection on the relation between fiction and history because it need not depend on an axiomatic claim about the interaction between historical or material conditions and individual works of art and literature, a claim that is itself structured as a narrative about the relations between historical (or social and economic) causes and literary and aesthetic effects. And, as I will begin to argue below, the worry that downplaying the historical aspect of literary works somehow deprives them of their political meaningfulness has been greatly exaggerated, and this exaggeration ought to be seen as providing some motivation for the rhetoric of materiality in literary studies.

So far I have outlined the sorts of challenges that must be met by any well-formed literary-critical methodology that would embrace materialism, and finally to explain why "textual" forms of materialism have such an apparently contradictory character: to the extent that they devote critical attention to texts as literature, they lose their strictly materialist character, and to the extent that they emphasize uniquely determining force of materiality, they can no longer recognize a "text." Perhaps it cannot be both textual and materialist at the same time. In order to explain why her brand of materialism does not extend consideration to *all* sorts of material objects and processes (varieties of sandstone, limbic systems of non-human animals, obscure

phase states of matter), the textual materialist must invoke a restriction that already assumes the difference between the kinds of things we call literary (which are, minimally, readable and interpretable) and everything else. This is what we saw above in terms of textual materialism's background commitment to the ideality or to the aesthetic character of the text as such.[12] In related fashion, the reference to historical or material conditions of work directs attention away from any particular text and towards the nearly infinite task of arranging massive sets of historical and empirical information, which task only ends up obscuring what is presupposed by the principles of selection at work in the decision to focus on *this* text or *this* authorship and not any other. The implicit criteria that motivate this selection depend on an aesthetic judgment – not in the sense of determining the aesthetic value of a work of raft, but in the much more basic understanding that some object simply is an artwork, that it is "about" something in the sense evoked by Danto above.

Despite these conceptual difficulties, "materiality" has nevertheless become an undeniably important concept for an exceptionally wide range of recent literary and cultural scholarship, as well as for philosophical and theoretical discourses on a variety of contemporary issues. Few will have overlooked the characteristic idiom

[12] Accordingly, the examples of "rematerialization" provided by Brown show the sorts of claims that become possible once this background commitment passes without recognition: he cites an article on representations of animals in medieval literature which claims that "medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts" (Holsinger 619). Such a claim obtains only under the most liberal criteria of rigor and only with an extremely reductionist notion of the "literal." Whatever else medieval literature might be, however it might survive as a set of artifacts, as "literature" it is made of words.

that accompanies the contemporary taste for materialism: whether the materiality in question belongs to history or the text, to the body or to the signifier, there can be little doubt about the deep investment of meaning and value into matter and its qualities. But what are these meanings and values, and where do they come from? What is it that matter or materiality are thought to explain that couldn't be explained by or within some other critical framework? Why is the scholarly turn to "material culture" so often granted, as Daniel Tiffany notes, not only an epistemological but an *ethical* priority – even while, as Tiffany goes on to claim, critics who embrace materialism so infrequently raise the fundamental "question of materiality," that is, the question about what material substance actually *is*?[13] The rarity of this question explains why at least one self-identified materialist critic can affirm that "it is very difficult indeed to be a materialist: much harder, for example, than declaring oneself a materialist or wishing to be such."[14]

In truth, there are as many answers to these questions as there are invocations of materialism, and it is this fact that in part accounts for skepticism about materialism even among some avowed materialists: with "the question of materiality" unasked, the argumentative or speculative commitment to materialism unexplained, references to matter in discussions of literary or aesthetic phenomena remain enigmatic. As we have shown, this is so because they appeal fundamentally to a

[13] Tiffany, Daniel. *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2000. p. 2
[14] Jarvis, Simon. *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. p. 79

domain *outside* the literary or the aesthetic in order to understand their (literary or aesthetic) object of inquiry, and it is this shift to the "extrinsic" (a term favored by Fredric Jameson) that is so often assigned epistemological, ethical, or political priority: in Jameson's words, "the scandal of the extrinsic comes as a salutary reminder of the ultimately material base of cultural production."[15]

It is outside the scope of this project to enter into too detailed a conceptual genealogy of this set of priorities and the multifarious determinations of "matter," both implicit and explicit, that have underwritten them. Such a genealogy would easily entail the recapitulation not only of the reception of "theory" in Anglo-American literary and cultural studies since the 1960s (with its abiding emphasis on the critique of metaphysical ideas about essence, identity, and subjectivity and its concomitant politicization of the idea and the practice of literary criticism) but also an investigation of the links, most notably theorized within Marxism and the dialectical materialist tradition, between physical reality and political norms. These are relations perhaps best emblematized by V.I. Lenin's 1908 *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism,* which provides a virulent denunciation of the scientific theories of space and time formulated at the turn of the twentieth century by Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré on the basis that they undermine the objective, material, and physically immediate reality of the world, and by extension the real basis of Marxist philosophy: as Stephen Kern

[15] Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981. p. 26

notes, "Lenin engaged in this polemic" against philosophers of science "because he believed that the reputation and political effectiveness of the Bolshevik party were at stake" (Kern 134). So while it is quite common within this tradition to use "material" as a synonym for "economic," as in Jameson's invocation of the Marxist conception of an economic base or infrastructure underlying all other social, cultural, and institutional formations, this terminology should not be understood to lack implicit reference to the more or less immediately available *physical character* of hard facts or objective realities that Lenin wanted to defend against subjectivist or idealist trends in science at the turn of the last century. If we wanted to understand the conceptual and historical impetus behind the most recent forms of textual materialism, this would not be a bad place to start.

Even without a very detailed genealogy, however, we can already effectively see how a more broadly construed materialism would be thought relevant to the interpretation of literature. Consider the methodological principles entailed by Jameson's commitment to the "salutary reminder" of the "material base of cultural production" as they are articulated in his broad interpretation of literary modernism, which pursues a dialectical resolution of the contradiction between modernism understood as a reflection or epiphenomenon of prevailing social conditions, and modernism understood as an avant-garde rupture from and repudiation of those conditions. Jameson writes that

> "[M]odernism and reification are parts of the same immense process which expresses the contradictory inner logic and dynamics of late capitalism. Yet even if our aim, as literary analysts, is rather to demonstrate the ways in which modernism – far from being a mere reflection of late nineteenth-century social life – is also a revolt against that reification and a symbolic act which involves a whole Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization on the level of daily life, we are first obliged to establish a continuity between those two regional zones or sectors – the practice of language in the literary work, and the experience of *anomie,* standardization, rationalizing desacralization in the *Umwelt* or world of daily life – such that the latter can be grasped as the determinate situation, dilemma, contradiction, or subtext, to which the former comes as a symbolic resolution or solution" (42).

What follows is a sophisticated theoretical treatment of mediation (that is, the methodological corollary of the critical imperative to establish continuity between different regions – linguistic text and environment); for the purposes of understanding the interpretive commitments of materialism in contemporary literary studies, though, Jameson's understanding of modernism can be taken as exemplary. And while Jameson does, in passing, raise "the question of materiality" in order to voice his skepticism about theories of materialism that are not historicist in the Marxist sense (inasmuch as the latter "does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination by the mode of production" [45]), the ambition to establish

principles that allow one to move from the language of a text to its "external" conditions remains a primary motivation for contemporary critical practice.[16]

More significantly still, it is quite intelligible to contemporary critics to employ the concepts of "matter" or "materiality" in far more flexible ways than does Jameson here, encompassing not only the historical or economic valences of these concepts, but the physical, objective, or anti-metaphysical ones, as well, as we have already witnessed. Thus Jed Esty, in a compelling account of the late modernism of Eliot, Woolf, and Forster, can identify his central argument as "strictly materialist" because of its central claim that "imperial contraction changed English writing through a series of symbolic mediations between social conditions and artistic production"[17];here materialism refers to a mode of relating a global historico-economic event (imperial contraction) with specific cultural practices (British late modernism). Another critic writing about the influences of architecture, design, and domestic space on modernist narrative suggests the possibility of "a kind of material genealogy of some of literary modernism's apparently autonomous elements"[18]; in this case, the notion of a

[16] In fact, then, what Tiffany calls "the question of materiality" becomes, for Jameson, a sort of ideological ruse, since for him the real nature of materialism is not a thesis about the "primacy of matter." For example, in a recent introduction to a published collection of interviews, he professes his indifference to "the kinds of differences philosophers generally fight about," in light of the "constructional and perceptual strengths and weaknesses of a given system." This indifference should not doubt be understood in terms of Jameson's properly *metacritical* project, which accords to Marxist historical materialism the privileged role of adjudicating the various liberatory or ideological impulses that inhabit any cultural object, including those made by philosophers, whatsoever. Finally, then, this means that "we're all idealists, all materialists; and the final judgment or label is simply a matter of ideology, or, if you prefer, of political commitment" (Buchanan, Ian and Fredric Jameson, eds. *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP 2007, p. 3)

[17] Esty, Jed. *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003. p. 7

[18] Rosner, Victoria. *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. p. 2

"material genealogy" – which, notably, contravenes the text's claim to autonomy – refers instead to an explanation of the textual representation of certain types of cultural products. Increasingly, predications of materiality in such formulations owe less to Jameson's notion of *historical* materialism as a doctrine about the epistemological and methodological priority of economic modes of production, even as they hew formally to the model we have seen Jameson provide: to be a materialist is establish continuity between only apparently disparate regions of the literary and the material, whether the latter is understood in historical, economic, political, or merely physical terms. In other words, materialism as it is so often used in literary studies can ultimately be understood to encompass a variety of forms of reference outside the language of the text itself, whether this reference is to modes of production (like capitalism), historical events (like imperial expansion, colonial domination, or discursive practices pertaining to nationhood, race, or gender), physical objects or cultural materials (like commodities or technological innovations), or indeed to either the real-world properties of the texts themselves (the material means of their production or dissemination, the socioeconomic networks of their reception) and the very materiality of their inscription (their nonliterary or non-signifying physical makeup, their embodiment as texts).

A synoptic characterization of materialism in literary and modernist studies is therefore available: materialism, however else this term is modified, consistently prioritizes historical or genetic forms of explanation over formal or aesthetic ones, or

else it argues that the form of a novel or a poem is itself best understood as an effect of historical conditioning. In this respect, it is clear why critical and theoretical practices that either implicitly rely upon or explicitly wish to establish protocols of translation between the realm of literary language and that of material reality (again, however the latter is construed) have proliferated in the field of modernist studies. As we have seen with Jameson, it is one of the great problems of the field to understand the relation between literary or aesthetic modernism (whether in its formally or stylistically inventive character, its avant-gardism, its refusal of Victorian aesthetic or moral mores, and so on) and modernity as such. Of course, this procedure of translation lends itself to typically political concerns, especially in light of the prevailing assumption that the political meaning or value of works of literature resides in their overt, activist repudiation of any notion of literary autonomy. Rebecca Walkowitz's remarks on the notions of aesthetic autonomy and political commitment in recent Joyce studies, which according to her has "sought to emphasize the political aspirations or 'political content' of James Joyce's writing,"[19] lucidly evokes this repudiation and its affirmation among contemporary readers of Joyce. According to Walkowitz, "these critics have aimed to correct or at least supplement previous studies that focused on Joyce's reputation as a European writer and aesthetic innovator...[w]hat it means to focus on Joyce's modernism has changed: we no longer

[19] Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. p. 55

reduce literary modernism to a collection of literary techniques, nor do we assume that British literary modernism … constitutes a homogenous cultural movement or a retreat from political and social action" (Walkowitz 55).

Walkowitz is, of course, correct; the ambition to demonstrate that literary modernism (in its embrace of literary autonomy or its experimentation with formal abstraction in the novel or the lyric) is *not* a "retreat" from forms of concrete political engagement is prevalent not only among readers of Joyce but in all corners of modernist studies. The proliferation of *redemptive* reading practices is characteristic of the materialist atmosphere of contemporary literary studies; in general terms, this redemptive mode operates according to a rhetorical opposition between the aesthetic, the literary, or the formal and the material, historical, and political. Evidence for this opposition is found in Walkowitz's contrast between the image of Joyce as "aesthetic innovator" that is corrected by an image of Joyce as engaged in a kind of writing that aims at some manner of social or political effect (in her account of Joycean style, these effects are intended as a consequence of the purported anticolonialism and antiracism of Joyce's fiction; the latter, in Walkowitz's words, "gives texture to an insubordinate cosmopolitanism" that embraces "intellectual vagrancy as a form of social critique" which in turn is part of an effort to "transform the consciousness of his readers" [57-8]). This rhetorical opposition between the aesthetic and the political (which, again, is a primary motivation for the invocation of materialism in literary studies) does not belong to Joyce's readers alone. For example, as I show in more detailed fashion in

the following chapters on Virginia Woolf's novels *Between the Acts* and *To the Lighthouse,* the one question that determines the critical orientation of so many recent readers of Woolf concerns whether or not the implicit political content of her work (or, indeed, the explicit political content of her non-fiction writing) mitigates the fact her membership in the British cultural and economic elite. As I argue, the attempt to politically redeem Woolf's fiction, on behalf of feminism or socialism, is often directed against an image of Woolf as Bloomsbury aesthete, severed from the "real" world and thus incapable of engaging in social critique through her art. Later, I will show through detailed readings of Woolf's fiction that a critic armed with the project of redemption from the start risks misunderstanding aspects of Woolf's writing that are not primarily political in nature.[20] For the time being, however, I maintain just that the opposition between the aesthetic and the material (here qua politically-articulated, concrete reality) that motivates "redemptive" readings is a misleading one, and furthermore that understanding why it is misleading will begin to lead us to a more original and workable concept of materialism in literary studies.

One of the central arguments that motivates the critique of materialism thus far elaborated is that the notion of an extra-aesthetic "materiality" falls short of

[20] And, in keeping with a methodological principle that I've outlined above, I believe that it is preferable to first ask how and why "politics" becomes a problem, a concept, or an issue within specific works of literature. In Woolf's case, this way of thinking provokes interesting reflection on what her fiction takes to be the specific nature of the "political" as such (as opposed, say, to the social, the economic, the cultural, the scientific, and so forth). The demands of this question are obscured by the approach that treats all works of literature as *a priori* political in exactly the same way, and where the meaning of this term is determined always in advance.

explaining the nature or meaning of actual works of art, since that project of explanation always presupposes a differentiation between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, which differentiation troubles explanatory strategies based on the reduction of the aesthetic to the material. So far this argument has taken place in a mostly formal register – that is, it takes for granted that the criteria of differentiation must, logically speaking, exist even if they are not explicitly determined. I will now give a somewhat extended example of how my argument works in practice, and show a specific case in which a sophisticated reader of the twentieth-century novel is led to make explicit claims that are ultimately at odds with the presuppositions of his argument. In presenting this argument, I will shift from the formal register in order to identify at least one criterion of distinction between the aesthetic and the extra- or non-aesthetic domain. This criterion is the kind of irresolvable ambiguity that belongs to aesthetic and not to other orders of meaning.[21] If the aesthetic is characterized in part by its articulation of a kind of meaning that is not conceptually articulated – if, in other words, it does not operate according to worldly epistemological norms – then it follows that it is intrinsically open to ambiguity. This is a version of the familiar thesis artworks produce and depend upon meaning in multiple ways, without needing to provide a standard by which to decide which of these possible meanings is the correct or final one. Ambiguity of this sort is, of course, a familiar phenomenon to students

[21] The modifier "irresolvable" is absolutely necessary to this formulation, since ambiguity can indeed be a feature of (for example) historical or scientific discourses that are more typically submitted to norms of truth and/or objectivity.

of modernism, ever since (inspired in part by modernist poetics) William Empson resolved, in his celebrated typology, to track down all the "machinations of ambiguity" that simultaneously complicate and make necessary the interpretation of poetry. For the materialist, though, this ambiguity is either difficult to register or difficult to explain. In what follows, I will give a concrete example of a recent account of modernism that implicitly *assumes* the ambiguity of the aesthetic even as their interpretive programs tend to downplay or disregard the latter. By pinpointing this minimal concept at work in criticism that is, on the whole, skeptical about the "autonomy" of the aesthetic, I aim not to prescribe any particular interpretive method but to describe the commitments implicit in the idea of interpretation, which therefore hold in principle for *any* interpretive method. Over the course of this dissertation, I will demonstrate how making that commitment explicit will open up new avenues for understanding modernist narrative practices that attempt to broadly reconfigure the relations between literary meaning and "worldliness," whether the latter is construed historically and politically (as is the case in the examples below) or philosophical and scientific.

In endorsing what I have very broadly outlined as the materialist program in literary studies, Edward Said presents *in nuce* its characteristic reductive operation. This operation is developed in some detail in the magisterial *Culture and Imperialism*, the aim of which is to "read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out,

extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works."[22] One is therefore tempted, first of all, to align Said's critical practice with the critique of ideology so prevalent in so much of today's literary and cultural studies. Yes, of course, from the standpoint that understands British modernism as systematically imbricated with real networks of colonial exploitation, Kipling's representations of colonial India and Conrad's images of the African heart of darkness (both of which "brought to a basically insular and provincial British audience the color, glamor, and romance of the British overseas enterprise" [132]) can appear as little else but fantasmatic objects for a metropolitan imagination stained by its own apology for imperialist expansion. Indeed, one of *Cultural and Imperialism*'s central claims – about the essential relation of its two titular phenomena – presents in crystallized form the background theoretical commitment and procedure of materialist criticism, namely the articulation of a duality of spheres or domains whose distinction is *apparent* but not *real*:

> "In much recent theory the problem of representation is deemed to be central, yet rarely is it put it its full political context, a context that is primarily imperial. Instead we have on the one hand an isolated cultural sphere, believed to be freely and unconditionally available to weightless theoretical speculation and investigation, and, on the other, a debased political sphere, where the real

[22] Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993. p. 66

> struggle between interests is supposed to occur. To the professional student of culture – the humanist, the critic, the scholar – only one sphere is relevant, and, more to the point, it is accepted that the two spheres are separated, *whereas the two are not only connected but ultimately the same*. A radical falsification has established this separation. Culture is exonerated of any entanglements with power, representations are considered only as apolitical images to be parsed and construed as so many grammars of exchange, and the divorce of the present from the past is assumed to be complete. And yet, far from this separation of spheres being a neutral or accidental choice, its real meaning is an act of complicity, the humanist's choice of a disguised, denuded, systematically purged textual model over a more embattled model, whose principal features would inevitably coalesce around the continuing struggle over the question of empire itself" (57, emphasis added).

If we accept, as we should, Walkowitz's description of the ongoing politicization of modernist studies, then Said's excoriation of modes of interpretation that endorse the strict separation between cultural and political spheres appears to motivate a research program that is now in the course of being fulfilled (if, indeed, it has not been completed). And while this characterization of the situation would not strictly speaking be incorrect, it doesn't fully capture the nuance of Said's own interpretive practices. Of course, Said is consistent in his view that economic or political histories and theories of imperialism (whether critical or affirmative) fail notably to explain the

special role of culture – especially literary culture and in particular the novel – in the formation and reproduction of pernicious Eurocentric values. In his words, "the global market accumulation that gathered the colonial domains into the world market economy was supported and enabled by a culture giving empire ideological license" (222). But Said's argument loses consistency, in a highly instructive fashion, when his remarks on literature and literariness call into question his more overt identification of culture and politics.

It is possible to mark the points in Said's argument at which the procedure of translation (which I have argued is a method of reduction), used by the critic is to demonstrate that and how the manifest distinction between domains dissimulates their real unity, relies on an inherent and irresolvable ambiguity. At least two instances in *Culture and Imperialism* show Said distancing himself, whether consciously or not, from the idea that the spheres of culture and politics are "ultimately the same." First, Said acknowledges in an early discussion of Dickens that refusing to endorse the supposed autonomy of fiction "does not reduce or diminish the novels' value as works of art: on the contrary, because of their *worldliness*, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting, they are *more* interesting and *more* valuable as works of art" (13). In other words, while he rejects any notion of aesthetic autonomy as *prima facie* spurious, Said nevertheless invokes a value for art *as art*, a value that it possesses in light of whatever marks or qualities ("worldliness") that, somehow, indicate the unique vocation of art and literature. Even if the *source* of value is

explicitly the "world" as such, the *sort* of value invoked is specifically artistic or cultural. That becomes quite clear when we consider that there's nothing at all noteworthy about calling, for example, economic value or moral value "worldly." Moral and political values serve as guides for action or for judgments of blame and praise, or as the background commitments of everyday decisions and allegiances – that such values are on some basic level "worldly" hardly bears remarking upon. Said's idea about the value of worldly works of art must depend on the idea that they can be *shown* to be worldly, that they are only apparently closed off from the world as it actually, historically, exists, and thus to secure their real value from the twin specters of aestheticism and literary formalism. This demonstration, of course, is the aim of *Culture and Imperialism* – which can now be read, in heterodox fashion, as motivating the defense of the specificity of aesthetic value. After all, it is the notion that literary artworks are even capable of being "reduced" or "diminished," and especially that such reduction is a threat to be warded off, that marks them as somehow valuable in themselves. Even as Said is at pains to deny the autonomy of the aesthetic (which, again, only articulates a notion the aesthetic inaugurated by Kant that "isolate[s] cultural and aesthetic spheres from the worldly domain" [58]), he is participating in a long tradition – one that certainly includes Kant – which has meditated on the very idea of a species of value that belongs to the aesthetic alone. And it should not at all be taken for granted that this tradition opposes the aesthetic and the worldly in the manner Said habitually implies.

It could here be objected that Said's approving remarks about the value of worldly artworks should not be employed to ground extrapolations about the more general contours of his project or about the even more general impetus among so much of today's literary and cultural studies to denigrate "the aesthetic" as an autonomous domain opposed to the material, the real, the historical, or the worldly. This objection is not without merit, and of course it is the case that the best critics often have more nuanced attitudes or complex methodologies than the more or less schematic overview presented here allows. But however nuanced or complex criticism like Said's might be, it rests on certain basic methodological commitments, and it is at this level that my argument intervenes. Said's remarks about literary or aesthetic value have exemplary weight because they straightforwardly deal with methodological stances so basic as to be axiomatic: that works of literature are interpretable, that the world provides the criterion of their interpretation (keeping in mind that we haven't yet accounted for just what the world is, or in what worldliness consists), and finally that *because* they are interpretable in the light of this criterion they are valuable *as* works of art (not as material objects or brute facts or epiphenomena of some larger historical process, for treating them as such would be an unwarranted reduction or diminution – i.e., *devaluation*). And it is precisely these background commitments that *entail* the ambiguity or conceptual indeterminacy of the aesthetic. And, finally, this commitment does not license a reductive explanatory strategy that would disallow

treating a work as meaningful only in light of its material or "worldly" contents and effects.

Consider that to "reduce" a work of art or literature means not simply devaluing it, but explaining it exhaustively in the terms of an order that is by definition neither artistic nor literary; for reduction to be possible, every element of the work needs to be straightforwardly decoded in terms of the reality to which it corresponds (it is worthwhile to note in passing that this is an operation strictly analogous to reductionism in the philosophy of mind, which argues that all qualities of conscious experience [*qualia*] ought to be explained only in terms of brain properties). Another way to put this is that "reduction" names a relation between forms of explanation: if the work in question requires no interpretation whatsoever, then it is available as pure data for the historian or the sociologist, and the historical or sociological explanation supplants the literary or aesthetic one. Even though Said overtly rejects the autonomy of the aesthetic, he clearly does not think that rejection underwrites reductionism of this sort. As he writes in an important passage, the fact that "the structure connecting novels to one another has no existence outside the novels themselves … obliges critics to read and analyze, rather than summarize and judge, works whose paraphrasable content they might regard as politically and morally objectionable" (76). This strict requirement that works be interpreted, that the "structure" they together form is strictly speaking *not available* to empirical reflection on history or society or politics broadly construed, encapsulates the fundamental ideas of *Culture and*

Imperialism. So while we ought to countenance the objection that a few passing remarks of Said's cannot reliably tell the whole story about his thought, in this case that objection carries no force – unless we suppose without reason that Said is not expressing his considered views.

I've just argued that Said rhetorically and conceptually allows space for a modest conception of aesthetic autonomy first by invoking a notion of value specific to the aesthetic and second by preserving the latter from the threat of reduction. As we saw, these are related moves in the argument: the aesthetic has value in view of its worldliness, and the observation that works of art and literature are fundamentally worldly does not serve to extinguish their artistic or literary character. This is the first instance in which ambiguity enters the picture. The (reductive) evaluation of the aesthetic or the literary in terms of a heterogeneous order – such as the political or the moral – is illicit to the extent that it neglects the demands of reading and analysis, that is, of interpretation. Interpretation is demanded in order to discover those worldly elements that give literary artifacts their value as literary (we take for granted that, for Said, the literary is the privileged but not the exclusive site of the aesthetic, for reasons that shall not be considered here). And interpretation is necessary because of the ineradicable ambiguities of the literary, by the *non-communicative* aspect of its language, in Said by the fact that the ideal networks and "structures of feeling"[23] in which

[23] Said employs this notion, originally articulated by Raymond Williams, essentially to describe the concrete social effects of the novel (including the modernist novel), essentially inasmuch as the latter normalizes certain ideas about imperialism, the relation between the metropolis and the colony, the cultures of colonial subjects, and so forth. In

literature participates must be constructed by the work of criticism. As Said argues, "there is no such thing as a *direct* experience, or reflection, of the world in the language of a text" (67); if there were, interpretation would not be required, because the language of a text could only ever be meaningful in virtue of the way it directly reflects "the world." In the most basic and banal sense, this means that the language of literature isn't a report on an actual state of affairs, and we don't understand that language in the way that we would understand such a report. When Pound's poem says that the faces in a crowd are "petals on a wet, black bough" we don't understand the faces to have literally been transformed into plants, just as we don't suppose that "In A Station of the Metro" is about one particular crowd seen at a certain time in a certain place in Paris. If the epistemological norms by which communication, "direct" reference or reflection, or reports on actual states of affairs do not uniquely determine the meaning of a work, then interpretation, however this procedure is actually construed in theory or in practice, is required at least in order to work out the range of plausible meanings a work might have. Conversely, if interpretation is necessary, as it obviously is for Said, then a variety of plausible meanings for the interpreted text must be available. But if this is so, the near-absolute privilege accorded to politically

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Williams's terminology, a structure of feeling is contrasted with official ideology or worldview and denotes "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (Williams 131). It is akin to practical consciousness or the lived experience peculiar to a specific social formation. Said's argument concerns literature that "makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe's overseas expansion, and therefore creates what Williams calls 'structures of feeling' that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (Said 14).

motivated forms of criticism (specifically anti-colonialism) implied by Said's claim about the identity or quasi-identity of the spheres of culture and politics ultimately lacks warrant. This, finally, is what poses a problem for the repudiation of a concept of the aesthetic domain as autonomous.

This problem in Said's approach become most clear when his claim about the identity of culture and politics finds itself at odds with his explicit worries about "reduction" of works of art to direct forms of political or social experience. This tension culminates in the following claim: "a novel is neither a frigate nor a bank draft. A novel exists first as a novelist's effort and second as an object read by an audience … but for all their social presence, novels are not reducible to a sociological current and cannot be done justice to aesthetically, culturally, and politically as subsidiary forms of class, ideology, or interest" (73). A novel is neither a "material" historical object nor an instrument of imperial expansion in literally the same way that a ship carrying colonists supports the endeavor of imperialism; despite its manifest social contents, it is not ultimately reducible to a sociological current, they ought to be treated justly in order to be understood: this certainly reads as a formulation of a minimal kind of aesthetic autonomy. However, to the extent that Said seems to endorse the political form of opposition between the aesthetic and the material elaborated above, he does not think in terms of what is *specific* to the aesthetic or the literary domain, and what I see as an important methodological insight of his argument is passed over.

The assumption that the marked presence, in a work of fiction, of any social, political, or historical content destroys any literary claim to autonomy rests, I want to argue, on a false notion of what autonomy of this sort means. I have shown Said excoriating a concept of the literary artwork as somehow immured from society, which concept he associates with aesthetic autonomy, even while he argues on behalf of a differently-conceived sort of autonomy. The solution to this impasse, which I have tried to motivate, is to reverse the order of explanation by asking how abstract concepts like "history" or even "imperialism" get articulated as concepts or problems within fictional narrative discourse. Pursuing things in this way, I argue, allows one to circumvent the problems associated with materialism that this chapter has so far been devoted to elaborating. Among other things, this means revising our conception of the relation between aesthetics and materiality (or its various conceptual surrogates): we needn't commit ourselves the untenable positions outlined in various guises above: either that these terms are *coextensive* or that they are *opposed*. It instead to treat the aesthetic and the material as autonomous domains, and ask after their points of interaction. With respect to literary studies, this means asking how it is, finally, that "materialism" becomes an active notion from the point of view specific to literature.

This is precisely the background procedure of this dissertation. I argue that even though the notion of materialism poses conceptual issues for the literary critic, it is not thereby an unrecoverable concept. For it is indeed the case, I will show, that the project of thinking through a form of "materialism" is actively at stake in literary

modernism and its successors. Elaborating this case depends, at least, on asking what Tiffany above called "the question of materiality;" but rather than asking "what material substance actually is," it is philosophically prudent to ask how material substance is *known*, qua material. Framed in this way, the reasons for asking how and why "materiality" becomes a problem for modernism become more evident. This framing also allows a consideration of why said materiality becomes a problem specific to literature in general and a thematic and generic issue in the modernist novel in particular; that is, it allows us to develop an account of materialism in modernist narrative discourse that does not enact an ultimately untenable disavowal of the autonomy of the aesthetic domain. In effect, this means that one can argue that literature is autonomous without meaning that it is divorced from, say, political, historical, or scientific concerns; on the other hand, it also means that political concerns (for example) cannot be given absolute privilege over other thematic issues that are also articulate the problem of materialism. Furthermore, I will argue that we should first of all understand these concerns in virtue of how they relate to formal and aesthetic questions; in other words, I want to show that what comes to be at stake in the encounter between the literary and the material is always the former's autonomy – not *from* the material, but from other domains that take materiality (in whatever form) as their object. In other words, the encounter with materiality provides modernist authors with both an obstacle and an opportunity for aesthetic renovation, because by

grappling with the experience and the knowledge of materiality, they find provocative but ambivalent images for the work of the novel.

CHAPTER 2

WOOLF, MATERIALISM, AND THE ELEGY FOR LITERATURE

Materialism Then and Now

If it is possible to settle on a single intellectual trend that might plausibly provide the most urgent research program for the humanities in twenty-first century, then materialism — in one guise or another — is the most obvious candidate. After all, it seems that materialism is not just one trend among equally satisfying (or unsatisfying, as the case may be) alternatives. Rather, it forms the explanatory horizon of so many forms of theoretical and philosophical endeavor, from those philosophers of mind still grappling with the modern explosion of neurological discovery to literary critics who perceive in the concept of materiality a refuge from the putative idealism of the so-called "linguistic turn." And while not all philosophers and not all critics are or claim to be materialist, it nevertheless appears that a genuinely contemporary approach to understanding the objects of a great many intellectual domains will eventually be obliged to confront materialist explanations of those objects. This cross-disciplinary materialist revival is in evidence in "continental" and "analytic" philosophy, in literary and cultural studies, in aesthetics and art history, and in political theory, to the extent that multifarious species of materialism (whether scientific or speculative, historical or metaphysical, cultural or textual) seem particularly well-equipped to respond to some of the deepest, most foundational

problems of these respective fields. The "hard problem" of the relation between brain and *qualia* or consciousness, problems of selfhood, subjectivity, and personal identity, questions about the epistemic status of the hard sciences and about the ontological status of objects posited in scientific theories, questions about the relationship between naturalism and normativity, the whole sub-disciplines of ontology and metaphysics, the philosophical fate of the human being and other animals, the inquiry into sheer life and its discursive, social, and "biopolitical" thematization, the effort to grasp conceptually those events, multiplicities, virtualities, temporalities, and other recalcitrant objects that are in whatever fashion asymmetrical to thought or experience, questions about the nature and role of the artwork and of aesthetic experience, the philosophical and political status of embodiment, the widespread recrudescence of historical materialism and the whole question of communism in the face of globalization and massive, unprecedented economic crisis: this is but a short list of the irredeemably complex and abiding problems which the contemporary resurgence of materialism might be said to address, in one way or another. The purview of the abundant "new materialisms" today seems, accordingly, vast.

Less than a century ago, however, the fascination with the concepts materialism and materiality which has gripped so many contemporary scholars was virtually absent from European intellectual life; on the contrary, there persisted a widespread view

according to which materialism was bad philosophy rooted in outdated science, a remnant of debates that stretched from the time of Democritus and Epicurus to the nineteenth century but which had apparently been rendered obsolete by twentieth century revolutions in philosophy, science, and technology.[24] Surprisingly, the rejection of materialism betrayed a deeply modernist spirit (even, perhaps especially, when that rejection was carried out in an anti-modern or "unmodern" spirit, as in the case of Nietzsche). And while literary modernists like Woolf and Yeats saw in materialism an apt figure for the intellectual and especially the artistic vices of their Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, matter's ostensible death-bed had already long been prepared.

In order to understand Woolf's modernist refusal of aesthetic or novelistic materialism, made explicit in the 1919 essay "Modern Fiction"[25] and ostensibly practiced in her major works of the 1920s, it is necessary to consider how the fate of materialism as a philosophical enterprise unfolded in the 19th century, and accordingly what this enterprise meant for Woolf and her intellectual contemporaries. A complete account of this unfolding would be the goal of a book-length study, and so cannot be presented here in any kind of detail; it's possible, however, to identify a few of the

[24] Certainly this sort of scientific anti-materialism remains in existence today (e.g. in the empiricism of Bas Van Fraassen or the structural realism of James Ladyman et. al.), though these views could almost certainly be situated in a historical account of the development of the modern philosophy of science inaugurated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and refined – alongside rapid scientific and technological development and with an increasingly sophisticated understanding of scientific practice – throughout the twentieth century.
[25] Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1984.

important plot twists of a more intricate story. This story largely takes place in Germany, where the legacy of Kantian transcendental idealism and its relation to scientific research formed the horizon of most dominant trends of philosophical activity; we will see, however, that questions about the relation between philosophy and modern science that were so urgent for nineteenth century German intellectuals set the stage for the prominent British anti-materialism of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The activity of philosophical critique discovered by Kant's Copernican turn is in part designed, Kant says in his preface to the second edition of the first *Critique*, to "sever the very root of materialism, fatalism, atheism, of freethinking unbelief, of enthusiasm and superstition,"[26] alongside other pernicious threats to philosophical rationality as much as to social well-being. The gesture of root-severing should be taken literally: for Kant, materialism is groundless metaphysical speculation. In the light of transcendental philosophy, it is neither more nor less justifiable than the "pneumatism" it opposes; both mistake a difference "in the mode of representing objects" (as either internal or external to consciousness) for a difference in things themselves, which are in Kant's view unknowable. Not only does materialist metaphysics succumb to the moral and social vices of atheism and fatalism, it cannot even secure its defining speculative proposition in the face of the skeptical demand

[26] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. p. 119/Bxxxiv.

for justification. As such, the claim that "there is nothing but matter" is indistinguishable from the claim that "there is nothing but soul" (or, for that matter, "there is nothing but water" and "there is nothing but fire"). Materialism is subjectivist idealism by another name, unable to reconcile its explicit stance with its implicit commitments.

The post-Kantian idealists continued to offer refutations of materialism by various means; like Kant, for example, Hegel saw in materialism the mistaking of an intellectual or conceptual activity for a real quality of the external world and a consequently illicit metaphysical system: materialism fails to recognize the intrinsically conceptual character of "matter" and collapses into an unreflected and groundless idealism. By the middle of the century, however, the scientific and technological – as well as the political – situation had altered in ways that provoked a vigorous reconsideration of both idealism (whether transcendental or speculative) and its interpretation and critique of materialism. Ludwig Feuerbach's influential critique of Hegelian idealism, which damned Hegel as having both illegitimately abstracted from and subsequently erased the real, experiential foundations of human life in his system of spirit, paved the way for a more thoroughgoing scientific materialism that was visible in both intellectual and public life in Germany in the 1850s. The *Materialismusstreit* associated with figures like Karl Vogt, Jacob Moleschott, Heinrich Czolbe, and especially Ludwig Büchner (whose popular defense of scientifically-grounded materialist atheism, *Kraft und Stoffe*, would be re-printed throughout the

century in multiple editions and translations) is largely absent from English-language scholarship, though its importance for subsequent philosophical history is undeniable.[27]

Here it is tempting and perhaps not altogether incorrect to interpose the claim that the German materialists of the fifties formed the continental analogues to the influential naturalists and agnostics emerging at the center of Victorian intellectual life in England, such as Herbert Spencer and Thomas Henry Huxley, one of the main proponents (alongside German biologist and artist Ernst Haeckel) of Darwinism after the 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species*, and, later, Virginia Woolf's father Leslie Stephen. Both English and German scientists and intellectuals enjoyed a growing public audience to whom they could address popularized accounts of recent scientific and philosophical developments, and if those developments implied or seemed to imply an embrace of materialism, then the stakes were viewed no longer in exclusively philosophical or scientific terms, but social and even ethical ones. The social purview of the scientific stance (certainly a common theme in Victorian intellectual life) is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Huxley's lecture on "The Physical Basis of Life," which concludes with a plea on behalf of the monumental relevance of

[27] The main study in English of the materialism controversy of the 1850s is Gregory, Frederick. *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany.* Dordrecht: Riedel, 1977. See also Gardner, Sebastian. "Idealism and Naturalism in the Nineteenth Century," in Allison Stone, ed. *Edinburgh Critical History of Philosophy, Vol. 5*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 2011, and Burrow, J.W. *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought 1848-1914.* New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2000. Finally, the mid-century materialists are briefly but evocatively described by Rudiger Safranski, in his biography of Martin Heidegger, as articulating an "ethos of a materialism of force and urge and glandular function" (29).

scientific inquiry even if the latter should embrace a (deceptively, to be sure) "materialistic" terminology:

> Why trouble ourselves about matters of which, however important they may be, we do know nothing, and can know nothing? We live in a world which is full of misery and ignorance, and the plain duty of each and all of us is to by to make the little corner he can influence somewhat less miserable and somewhat less ignorant than it was before he entered it. To do this effectually it is necessary to be fully possessed of only two beliefs: the first, that the order of Nature is ascertainable by our faculties to an extent which is practically unlimited; the second, that our volition counts for something as a condition of the course of events." (Huxley 165)[28]

However, materialism was rarely if ever explicitly embraced in the British context of post-Darwinism and in debates about spontaneous generation – debates which comprised the ostensibly materialist view that life could spontaneously be created by lifeless and insensate matter, what Huxley called "abiogenesis"[29]. Importantly, Huxley as well as Darwin himself considered abiogenesis to have been *experimentally* invalidated by Louis Pasteur in the early 1860s[30] While the emergence of life from inorganic matter may once have happened deep in the past, it was

[28] Huxley, Thomas Henry. *Collected Essays, Vol I.* New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1901.
[29] A good overview of the spontaneous generation debate in the nineteenth century, see Strick, James. *Sparks of Life: Darwinism and the Victorian Debates over Spontaneous Generation.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
[30] Cf. Strick 20-1

considered conclusive that no such emergence could happen in the *present* (a view which seems *prima facie* accommodating to natural theological views about the origin of life on earth). In his aforementioned 1868 lecture addressed to an audience gathered in Edinburgh for lectures on "non-theological topics," Huxley therefore explicitly set out to refute materialist doctrines of abiogenesis and vitalism that were putatively both philosophically and scientifically unfounded (as Strick points out, the explicitness of this refutation may well have had some distinctly rhetorical end: "[Huxley] was known as a very shrewd public speaker that often cleverly undercut theology by appearing to use its own arguments" [21]). The naturalist and physicalist but vocally anti-materialist stance that Huxley prepared in "The Physical Basis of Life," with is its enshrinement of the "protoplasm" as the crucial point of scrutiny for the emergent biological sciences, was an important influence over the course of the entire century, and its genuine attitude towards materialism is difficult to decipher. This difficulty is engrained in its enigmatic conclusion, which appears to urge the "man of science" not to mistake the increasingly materialistic language of science in its descriptions of the "phenomena of Nature" for the reflection of a world that we actually know in its intrinsic character. If "matter and spirit are but names for the imaginary substrata of groups of natural phenomena" (160) and materialism and spiritualism alike are therefore unjustified (on Humean grounds) in virtue of their status as inductions, then we can happily adopt the physicalist stance of biological science (by refusing the appeal to non-physical or supernatural entities in order to

furnish explanations of biological phenomena) *while* rejecting the metaphysical "errors of systematic materialism may paralyse the energies and destroy the beauty of a life" (165). In effect, truly modern science can be "materialistic" without the old fancy of materialism; what genuinely scientific endeavor could embrace so firm a metaphysical commitment to the ultimate nature of things, after all, in an age when novel hypotheses and theories were produced and discarded at such rapid pace?[31]

In fact, the conceptual relation between materialism (as both a figure rhetorically employed and an actual philosophical doctrine) and modernity at large turns out to be surprisingly fraught. To return to the German materialists of the fifties, Frederick Beiser has said (in a scathing review of a historical volume on nineteenth century philosophy that neglects any mention of the mid-century *Materialismusstreit*) that "the materialism controversy was as important for German philosophy in the late nineteenth century as the pantheism controversy in the late eighteenth century. The position of every philosopher was determined by where he stood in this controversy. It was the very touchstone of whether a thinker was for or against the cause of modernity."[32] In one respect, this importance ultimately has less to do with the explicitly endorsed doctrines of the materialists themselves than with

[31] On Huxley and Helmholtz's wariness of metaphysics in the heyday of positivism *à la* Auguste Comte and Ernst Mach, despite their own explicit criticisms of the same, cf. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity.* New York: Zone 2007. p. 213 *et passim.*

[32] Beiser, Frederick. "Alan Schrift and Daniel Conway, eds. *Nineteenth Century Philosophy: Revolutionary Responses to the Existing Order*." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews.* West Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame College of Arts and Letters, August 2011. Web. April 29, 2014.

the increased visibility of the problem space that materialism indexed (concerning the fundamental relations between scientific research, empirical discovery, and philosophical methodology) and especially with the reaction that the resurgence of materialism in intellectual and public life provoked. As Helmut Pulte has observed, by the time that writers like Vogt, Moleschott, and Büchner were popularizing contemporary science (which, for them, went hand in hand with the philosophical defense of materialism) in journals like *Die Natur* and *Das Jahrhundert* (Gregory 7), "science had become the prevailing signature of culture, and philosophy – at that time dominated by the systems of speculative idealism – lost its authority in matters of scientific rationality. Quite the contrary, philosophy itself increasingly became the target of 'scientistic' criticism, that is, it was accused of not (or of no longer) being able to judge what rationality meant in the different discourses of science and of not obeying scientific standards in its *own* discourse" (Pulte 101).[33] It's in light of the apparent possibility and tenability of an empirical refutation of the claims of philosophical reason that the challenge of materialism (as a doctrine ostensibly founded solely on the largely reductionist worldview of modern science and so supported by new technical developments in the sciences of evolutionary biology, physiology, empirical psychology, optics, and so on) fully emerges, and the response to this challenge defined the scope of philosophy in Europe for decades to come.

[33]Pulte, Helmut. "Kant, Fries, and the Expanding Universe of Science" in Michael Friedman and Alfred Nordmann, eds. *The Kantian Legacy in Nineteenth Century Science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 2006.

Perhaps inevitably, the attempt to ground the authority of philosophical rationality in a debate about the respective foundations and boundaries of philosophy and science quickly alighted upon the need to reformulate Kantian philosophy in light of or in the face of contemporary scientific practice. The notorious rallying cry of neo-Kantianism – "back to Kant!," the demand that Otto Liebmann addressed to Kant's lesser "epigones" – established the tone for an institutional renaissance of Kantian thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (a renaissance which also provided the intellectual and philosophical background for the philosophical trends that are far more visible in literature departments today, like phenomenology and Frankfurt School critical theory). Certainly, the stakes of early neo-Kantianism were decidedly anti-materialist, a fact made explicit early on in its history in the work of Friedrich Albert Lange. His monumental 1865 work *History of Materialism* carried out a critique of all materialist philosophy, from Democritus to the scientific materialists of the fifties.[34] In some ways, this critique takes shape in ways that would have been familiar in Kant's day: Lange writes, for example, that "materialism lacks relations to the highest functions of the free human spirit. It is,

[34]A longer consideration of materialism in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century would give centrality to Lange's work (Lange, Friedrich Albert. *The History of Materialism and Critique of its Present Importance*, Third edition. Trans. Ernest Chester Thomas. London: Kegan Paul, 1925). In fact, the *History of Materialism* had not only broad influence upon later neo-Kantians (who set the stage for many of the major developments of twentieth-century philosophy) as well as Nietzsche and Russell, as I've indicated here; as a matter of sheer historical curiosity it is an important document for the philosophical background of Pound's and Eliot's poetics in the 1910s. This is because it is indirectly responsible, as Michael Levenson reports in *A Genealogy of Modernism,* for the revival of interest in Max Stirner's work *The Ego and his Own* in England and abroad in the first decades of the twentieth century. Cf. Levenson, Michael. *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. pp. 65-6.

apart from its theoretical inadequacy, barren for science and art, indifferent or inclined to egoism in the relations of man to man. It can hardly close the circle of its system without borrowing from idealism" (Lange 340). But it was ultimately necessary to pursue a rejection of materialism that Kant could not himself have formulated, if only because materialism had become a stronger and seemingly more empirically sophisticated opponent in the intervening decades. Lange admits, for instance, that the scientific endeavor to determine with exactitude the physiological mechanisms of sensation, a determination or discovery which might putatively solve the problem of reducing conscious sensation and experience to purely material mechanisms, is neither "superfluous nor inadmissible." But such a discovery still only pertains to appearances – "necessarily occurring picture(s) of an unknown state of things" (229); accordingly, "the resolution of psychical activity into brain and nerve mechanism is the surest way to the knowledge that here our horizon of our knowledge closes in, without touching the question of what mind is in itself. The senses give us, as Helmholtz says, *effects* of things, not true pictures nor things in themselves. But to the mere effects belong also the senses themselves, together with the brain and the molecular movements we suppose in it" (*ibid.*). In other words, a neo-Kantian conception of appearances can accommodate even the most sophisticated scientific explanations of the mechanism of sensation by defending the claim (likewise empirically well-founded in virtue of Helmholtz's research) that the matter of all sensation – *including* sense organs themselves in scientific physiology – is constructed inferentially on the basis of

unknowable things in themselves. Materialist forms of explanation are once again severed at the root.

By preserving the priority and authority of philosophical reason while at the same time accommodating the explanatory autonomy of experimental science with respect to "appearance" Lange (in this respect on common ground with the conclusions reached by Huxley above) and the neo-Kantian tradition that he helped to initiate prepare a new conception of the failure of materialism. The familiar counterarguments – that materialism collapses into idealism or that it cannot explain mind or consciousness – retain some of their force, to be sure. But with rapid changes in scientific and technological discovery (for example, the development of thermodynamics and electromagnetic theory in mathematical physics and evolutionary accounts of speciation, individuation, and the origin of life in the emergent life sciences), the ancient substantialist view of matter became increasingly irrelevant to experimental and explanatory practice as well as the scientific worldview at large. Accordingly, Friedrich Nietzsche — no great defender of science but an enthusiastic reader and critic of Lange — could write twenty years after the publication of *The History of Materialism* that "materialistic atomism" is "one of the most well-refuted things in existence,"[35] and Bertrand Russell, introducing Lange's work to a contemporary Anglophone philosophical audience in 1925 (the same year that Woolf's

[35] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 14

"Modern Fiction" was revised and published), reminded his readers of the "professional contempt" held by scientists and philosophers of metaphysics alike toward materialism.[36]

This contempt is shared by those philosophical figures who are for various reasons thought to be most proximate to the cultural modernism that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century: in France, Henri Bergson; in Germany, Edmund Husserl and his erstwhile pupil Martin Heidegger, as well as Freud; in England, Russell and especially Alfred North Whitehead, not to mention Wyndham Lewis, who straddled the boundaries between fiction, painting, philosophy, and outright polemic. It's crucial to see in these developments, however, not merely a rejection of materialism but a rejection of an older conflict between materialism and idealism whose very premises can be abandoned according to sufficiently modern philosophical and scientific criteria: this is a characteristically modernist approach to the problematic of materialism. This approach has to do in no small part with a continued and intensifying need on the part of philosophers to account for new discoveries in the exact sciences; Whitehead, for example, sees in Einstein's relativity theory reason enough for revising the notion of materiality that had hitherto been constructed on the basis of an induction from the evidence of sense data: since it may be that an electron does not continuously traverse a space but appears

[36] Russell, Bertrand. "Materialism, Past and Present," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 211

discontinuously in different points in space (like an automobile that "appeared successively at … successive milestones"), then "we have to revise all our notions of the ultimate character of material existence."[37] The cosmology that sees "brute matter…spread throughout space in a flux of configurations," and which is "in itself….senseless, valueless, purposeless" is for Whitehead an assumption that is "entirely unsuited to the scientific situation at which we have now arrived" (17).

Russell likewise wrote that "materialism and idealism have been guilty, unconsciously and in spite of explicit disavowals, of a confusion in their imaginative picture of matter. They have thought of the matter in the external world as being represented by their percepts when they see and touch, whereas these percepts are really part of the matter of the percipient's brain;"[38] a sufficiently revised understanding of material existence in the light of a sufficiently scientifically-grounded understanding of perception would yield, on the contrary, a picture in which such perceptions do not track "pieces" of physical matter — tables or chairs or oranges or sheep, individual substances in the Aristotelian sense — but instead, Russell emphasizes, "physical *event(s)*…not to be confounded with pieces of matter. A piece of matter," Russell says, "is a logical structure composed of events" (590). Two years earlier, in "Materialism Then and Now," his preface to Lange's *History of Materialism*, Russell wrote that materialism is acceptable as a thesis of the reducibility

[37] Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and the Modern World.* New York: The Free Press, 1925. p. 35
[38] Russell, Bertrand. "Physics and Neutral Monism," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 589

of scientific theories to the language of physics, so long as it was understood that "physics itself is not materialistic in the old sense, since it no longer assumes matter as permanent substance," (Russell 219-220) in the manner of the indestructible and impenetrable *atomon* of the old cosmology. The genuinely scientific attitude toward matter must always be up to date, and in being up to date it can only in the current state of knowledge an indication of what is *possibly* the case, not what is necessarily real. With the arrival of Einstein's theory, even the old deterministic worldview – long associated with naturalist scientific explanation and materialist metaphysics – eradicated the required assumption on the part of either physicists or philosophers that atoms behaved with the lawlike regularity predicted by Newtonian theories of space and time. "Thus even within the pure physics of inorganic matter," Russell writes, "the reign of law cannot be asserted to be universally indubitable" (217). And the increasingly plausible doubt directed toward determinism in physics holds *a fortiori* in younger scientific disciplines whose experimental success was putatively less well-founded than that of mathematical physics: "this doubt cannot but be increased when we pass on to biology and psychology... the discovery of quanta in physics shows how rash it is to dogmatize as to the further surprises which an advanced science may have in store for us; and psychology is by no means an advanced science" (*ibid.*).

The skepticism directed towards materialism by Russell and others is an index of what they conceived to be a specifically modern relation to science; it is intended neither as a defense of piety nor a reactionary effort to secure the vanity of the

human in the face of an alienating scientific worldview. In the accounts of Russell and his colleague Whitehead – and many of their intellectual and cultural peers – materialism did not fall prey to idealist critique but to scientific refutation; its epitaph was engraved by the modern research in physiology, perception, and especially relativity theory.

It becomes increasingly clear that materialism has a decisively ambivalent relationship to modernity as such. Speaking of the *Materialismusstreit*, Beiser says that in the middle of the nineteenth century, a thinker's attitude towards materialism was an index of his or her attitude towards modernity. Indeed, the whole vexed category of modernity, depending on how the latter is construed, encompasses the materialization and the mathematization of nature carried out by experimental science and natural philosophy from the time of the Enlightenment.[39] It seemed plausible, perhaps inevitable, to mid-nineteenth century thinkers that the technological capacity to map fully the place of the human being in that material and mathematical order would soon arrive, if it had not already done so; materialism (in both scientific and historical variations) became the philosophical doctrine *par excellence* of an incipient, finally consummated modernity. In subsequent decades, however, Beiser's claim about the relationship between materialism and modernity remained true, but often in virtue of a diametrically opposed sense: being against materialism often explicitly

[39] Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age.* Trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985. p. 164

meant being *for* modernity. Clearly this is true for Russell, Whitehead, Bergson, T.E. Hulme, and others; it likewise describes the rhetoric of Woolf's modernist anti-materialism in her widely read statement of aesthetic doctrine, "Modern Fiction," written in 1919 and revised in 1925 in *The Common Reader,* two years prior to the publication of *To the Lighthouse*.

Woolf's anti-materialism was certainly not unprecedented even within the domain of imaginative literature. Indeed, an old story about the cultural origins of modernism links the latter with a return to characteristically romantic fixations on the supremacy of aesthetic experience and the life of spirit; it was along these lines that Yeats wrote – already as early as 1897 – that "the reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth, and the symbolical movement … is certainly the only movement which is saying new things."[40] Edmund Wilson's early and influential study of international modernism, *Axel's Castle* cites Yeats's anti-materialist enthusiasm in building its quasi-dialectical case for the return of the romantic in modernism[41], and since that time a number of scholars have emphasized the various ways in which this connection might be construed (especially with respect to modernist symbolism).[42] What the account

[40] Yeats, William Butler. *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Third edition. London: A.H. Bullen, 1907. p. 294
[41] Wilson, Edmund. *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*. New York: Scribner's, 1931.
[42] Cf. Kermode, Frank. *The Romantic Image.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957; and most recently Halmi, Nicholas. *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. The question about the relation between modernism and romanticism is perhaps not so urgent today, but some of the major critical takes on modernism written in the 1980s, such as Ricardo Quinones's *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985) and Sanford Schwartz's *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early 20th-Century Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1985) felt the need to address or reevaluate the perceived

presented here demonstrates, however, is that the assimilation of the modernist rejection of materialism in particular to a romantic ethos is flawed to the extent that it does not recognize just how closely bound this rejection was to a specifically modern possibility of "saying new things," as Yeats has it. Woolf's distaste for the "materialism" of her Edwardian rivals is most certainly a related attempt to diagnose — and prescribe a cure for — problems in the approach to writing novels that was for all intents and purposes formalized in the 18th century and which had attained cultural dominance by the end of the 19th. Its repudiation of materialism is tied so clearly to questions about a sufficiently modern aesthetic and novelistic form, and with a modern break from the dead weight of convention impeding artistic freedom, that it is almost impossible to see it as expressing either implicitly or explicitly the wish for a return of any identifiable romanticism, even if a formal analogy between Woolf and her ostensible romantic forebears can be discerned. We have already suggested that this is due largely to the revised attitude toward materialist explanation found in philosophies of science in the first decades of the twentieth century. More important and more obvious is the fact that the cultural status of the novel itself is much

continuities between romanticism and modernism, not only in light of scholarship like Kermode's in the 1950s which cast suspicion on the New Critical idea that modernists exemplified a radical break with the nineteenth century, but also because the emerging focus on the "postmodern" ostensibly incorporated (by then canonical) modernists into the traditions and conventions of a burdensome cultural past. My argument about Woolf does not address this broader question of periodization. About this, my basic claim – undefended here – would be that the way to conceptualize the relation between the romantic and the modern is not in terms of formal continuity or analogy, but within the broader and more complex problematic of modernity as such. In short, I am arguing here that while Woolf shares with the romantics, generally speaking, an antipathy or allergy to materialism, this antipathy has distinctly non-romantic sources and identifiably modernist stakes.

different by the beginning of Woolf's century than it was at the beginning of the nineteenth; the fact that Woolf's battle against literary materialism is waged in *narrative* and not lyric will therefore be a central point of exploration in the analysis that follows, since it will help solidify the claim that materialism indexed for Woolf (and for many moderns) a distinctly contemporary intellectual and aesthetic problem. It will likewise open the door to a consideration of Woolf's ideas about the status of narrative and the novel (as against the lyric modes of Pound or Eliot, but also the plastic medium of modern painting) within the broader artistic, intellectual, and cultural situation of modernism.

Others have seen in Woolf's anti-materialism not a romantic pedigree but an explicit return to a form of spiritualism held over from Victorian fashion of the mid- to late-nineteenth century; they express surprise that Woolf should have chosen to align both herself and her conception of modern art with spiritualism and against materialism and scientific naturalism.[43] Even the brief overview of the conceptual history of materialism presented here strongly suggests that such an interpretation misunderstands just how up-to-date Woolf's anti-materialism is; behind this misunderstanding is the more fundamental mistake of assuming the equivalence of materialism and naturalism. As we have seen in cases from Huxley to Russell, scientists and scientifically-minded philosophers has no special need for the explicitly

[43]Cf. Gaipa, Mark. "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse." Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (Winter 2002-2003). p. 2 *et passim*.

ontological or metaphysical commitments that materialism entails. There are at least two points that this realization allows us to make vis-à-vis Woolf.

First, we can recognize to what extent "Modern Fiction" considers the artist and the scientist analogously in terms of their unsteady positions within an uncertain historical situation; it is a largely tacit analogy but one that we can anticipates the spirit of Eliot's declaration, published in *The Dial* in 1923, that Joyce's *Ulysses* had "the importance of a scientific discovery."[44] Clearly, discovery was both a problem and a blessing for both artists and scientists. Modern science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had arrived, we've shown, at a position from which it could be more or less confidently insisted that the materialist dream of unifying the various domains of natural science by the total mathematization of nature ("the inspiring vision," writes Michael Friedman of the Enlightenment rationalism contributing to this project, "fueled by Copernicanism and the example of Galileo, of a precise mathematical description of all the phenomena of nature under a single set of mathematical laws uniting the earth and heavens, to be achieved by an atomistic or corpuscular theory of matter that reduced all natural changes to the motions and mutual impacts of the constituent particles"[45]) had decisively mistaken appearances for reality. The old objection that materialism collapsed into idealism, precisely by taking a non-empirical and ostensibly irrational abstraction as the basis of reality,

[44] Eliot, T.S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc. 1975. p. 177

[45] Friedman, Michael. *Dynamics of Reason*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications 2001.

received new support and new formulations by empirically well-founded theories of the physiology of perception and the technological possibilities of measure and quantification newly afforded to researchers in optics, psychology, and the brain sciences.

Recall Russell's claim that both older forms of idealism and materialism "have thought of the matter in the external world as being represented by their percepts when they see and touch, whereas these percepts are really part of the matter of the percipient's brain." In other words, the objects of immediate acquaintance are neither things nor ideas but products of sub-representational physiological processes. These and related insights were tellingly crucial modernism's most prominent critics and intellectuals virtually since its inception, and established early on that aesthetic theory and artistic practice alike were in a special position to account for the enshrinement of subjective life that had become cutting-edge in science and philosophy. For example, Remy de Gourmont, among the chief symbolist influences on Pound and Eliot, wrote that "idealism is definitely founded on the very materiality of thought, considered as a physiological product … if knowledge of the world is the work of a humble physiological product, thought … then the world can be considered as unknowable, since each brain or each nervous system draws from its vision and its contact a different image...idealism means materialism, and conversely, materialism means

idealism"[46]. T.E. Hulme, erstwhile poet and enthusiastic Bergsonian, likewise found in Bergson's attack on materialism (which offers yet another version of the idea that the materialist has mistaken just one part of reality for the whole) the grounds upon which to justify, or at least urge, a revised picture of modern literature. In Michael Levenson's words, "as metaphysics becomes untenable, it is the intuiting subject which becomes pre-eminent. Similarly, as the epic aspiration disappears from literature, personal expression takes its place. The struggle of modern poetry becomes the struggle of *le moi profond*: against language, against convention, against habit, against the seductions of metaphysics, in order to achieve satisfactory expression" (Levenson 47).

Woolf's objections to materialism in "Modern Fiction," we shall see, are more or less continuous with these themes, and its conclusions certainly enshrine a form of life or spirit utterly unavailable to putatively materialist representation or depiction. I have already argued that in this, Woolf is doctrinally consistent with one of the dominant intellectual trends in modernism, though I will show below that Woolf's anti-materialism turns out to have unique and far-reaching stakes. But there is a second point to be made that will establish the analogy of literature and science in Woolf's essay. The latter begins by expressing anxiety about whether modern novelists have made any improvement in their craft since the genre was formalized by

[46]de Gourmont, Remy. *Selected Writings* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1966), p. 167-8. Cited in Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism*.

predecessors like Fielding and Austen. After all, modern technology has made such spectacular strides – why not modern literature, as well? But whereas progress in the sphere of technological development is easily discerned in the present, the same cannot be said with respect to the sphere of literature ("it is doubtful," Woolf writes, "whether in the course of centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature" [146]). This is because it is only from a "sufficiently lofty pinnacle" – that is, from the abstract viewpoint of the contemporary moment in the context of literary history as a whole – that anything like progress, development, or refinement in literature might be identified as such. And "it need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon that vantage ground … it is for the historian of literature to decide; for him to say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible" (146). Of course, holding such an explicit view doesn't keep Woolf from (privately) claiming access to just such a lofty pinnacle – in a diary entry written in the summer of 1926, during the time that Woolf was drafting *To the Lighthouse*, she records that a novel she is reading (*C* by Maurice Baring) "will not exist in 2026."[47] In any case, what we should recognize is that for Woolf, writers and critics who have found themselves dispossessed of an absolute standard of judgment that could only be provided by a historical view from nowhere find

[47]*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three: 1925-1930.* Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. New York: Harvest, 1980. p. 103.

themselves on strikingly similar terrain as philosophers of science who prudently refuse the mistake of making qualities of appearance into real features of the world as it is in itself, not in the name of skepticism but of a flexible and empirically-grounded naturalism; to commit such a mistake, after all, would just be to expose oneself to inevitable refutation by the next great scientific discovery. Likewise, the Edwardian literary materialists– Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy – who Woolf scorns notoriously "write of unimportant things … they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring." Art and science are together exposed to a broader "culture of metaphysical crisis," in the words of Michael Levenson.[48]

But this leads to a second and more important claim that will underpin the interpretation of Woolf's fiction carried out in this chapter. Whereas influential intellectuals like Gourmont and Hulme endorsed explicitly philosophical rejections of materialism (rejections typically allied with more well-known figures like Nietzsche and Bergson), and on that explicitly philosophical basis found possibilities for a renewed or refined conception of modern art, materialism is for Woolf finds its place in a system of figures that exclusively concern art and the sphere of the aesthetic. In other words, the critique of Edwardian materialism that she pursues in "Modern Fiction" and attempts to practice in *To the Lighthouse* is not rooted in specifically

[48] Levenson, Michael. *Modernism.* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011). p. 19

philosophical worries about the shortcomings of materialism as a metaphysical doctrine. To be sure, Woolf was most certainly aware of these putative shortcomings to some degree or another; the main source for her vocabulary, in this instance, is her father Leslie Stephen's lecture "What is Materialism?," delivered in 1886 and published in 1903 in the volume of essays *An Agnostic's Apology*.[49] For Woolf materialism, that borrowed word, is "vague" as a description for kind of literary practice, but it has its own sort of precision within the sphere of art: for instance, the old idea that the materialist picture of nature could neither explain nor comprehend the spontaneity or freedom of human action is transposed onto an aesthetic terrain where freedom is no longer a question of metaphysics but of a writer's capacity to break with convention, habit, tradition, and artifice (it's perhaps another mark of Woolf's distance from romanticism that "Modern Fiction" doesn't betray much of any sense that an analogy might be found between artistic freedom of this type and the metaphysical free will of man in nature).

On the most basic interpretation, then, materialism in "Modern Fiction" only appears as an image of the kind of novels that Woolf doesn't want to write; a modern fiction embraces the realization that "nothing – no 'method,' no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden, but only falsity and pretense" (154). The falsity of materialist writers, their adherence to a solid, well-established craft governed by

[49] Stephen, Leslie. "What is Materialism?," in *An Agnostic's Apology*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1903.

convention and artifice ("the writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole" [149]), leads only to "the dust and the desert" where life can find no home and no expression. Really, it leads to death in two senses: the writing of the materialists is "embalmed," lifeless, concerning bodies lacking any spirit or vital spark, and so on. But it is also, we surmise, fiction which (like Baring's) "will not exist in 2026." In a strong sense, materialism is a metaphor or device upon which Woolf can project in an image of the novel that will endure, and which will still find readers a century later; like the Leslie Stephen surrogate Mr. Ramsay, Woolf betrays a distinct anxiety about the thought that "the very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare".[50] Worried constantly about his fame as a scholar and his place in philosophical history, Ramsay believes that "it is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies of how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? (…) What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long waste of ages?" Woolf, too, has in mind a view on "the long waste of ages" provided by that "sufficiently lofty pinnacle" to which she had earlier denied herself access; how else could she recognize in materialism merely an embrace of the trivial and the transitory?

[50] Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2005. p. 39

The construction of modern literature – that is, giving literature a modern form – involves the thought of Ramsay's "hereafter," not on heaven but on earth. And this thought, I will suggest, is not entirely consonant with the rejection of materialism that Woolf explicitly pursues. Of course, in the most literal sense, she does not write like Arnold Bennett. But the system of metaphors that she employs while refusing the blatant artifice of her rivals suggests that death and the infertile, lifeless desert of matter – the objects of a vision only in the hereafter – are inextricable from Woolf's conception of modern literary form. To the extent that this is so, it becomes possible to justify the claim that the whole problem of materialism and the figuration of "materiality" in Woolf's criticism and fiction are actually key parts of a broader project of self-description; what we find in *To the Lighthouse* is that this project is carried out most visibly and most compellingly when allegories of literary and narrative form become likewise most conspicuous. The point of making this argument, in the end, is certainly not to say that Woolf turns out to be a materialist despite herself, and ought thus to be celebrated (Whiggishly) as a precursor to today's fashionable materialism – a political and metaphysical radical and not, after all, an idealist and a snob. Rather, I will show why a "view from no one," which destroys as much as it preserves life and the living presence of conscious experience, remains a central aesthetic problem in Woolf's fiction, and identify the ways in which it expresses a unique and uniquely modernist preoccupation with both the conditions and the future of art. In this, it will ultimately become clear why Woolf's treatment of

materialism as an aesthetic problem can never *itself* be materialist, even as it borrows from materialism a certain will to destructive abstraction. Because the figuration of so-called materiality in art is only recognizable as such within a work which addresses itself to its literary-historical situation as much as to its own formal status *as* art (neither of which can be totally resolved just in terms of "materiality" without sacrificing the very concept of "art" and "artwork), Woolf's insight that materialism is the principal aesthetic obstacle to the literary effort to be modern suggests a complex relation to this sort of figuration in her own work, but also a prescient skepticism about attempts (even contemporary and avant-garde ones) to champion a notion of ostensibly sheer materiality as the *de rigeur* object of a genuinely modern theory of art.

What is Materialism?

It was Woolf's father's lecture "What is Materialism?" that almost certainly forms the most immediate background to Woolf's use of that enigmatic term. Stephen's titular question remains entirely unsettled, and the theoretical problems borne within the deceptively simple term "materialism" are recalcitrant; today, there are perhaps as many answers to his question as there are materialists. Stephen himself says that "materialism should apparently denote the doctrine that matter is the ultimate reality," which means that "nothing really exists except matter, in various combinations from stones to brains" (Stephen 129), just as spiritualism (or "pneumatism" in Kant's language) says that nothing properly exists but thought.

Immediately, however, he encounters a problem: "the statement is simple and clear enough if we assume that matter and spirit are words which denote directly known entities. But this is exactly one of the cases in which we have begged the question when we have given the names" (*ibid.*). "Matter" and "spirit" – as opposed names for an "ultimate reality" of which everything that appears in experience is a modification – have, by themselves and *qua* names, no other content than what they have been coined to define; it's in this sense that some basic formulation of materialism might be straightforwardly question-begging. Such is the difficulty in conditions where, as Stephen says to inaugurate his critique of materialism, "metaphysical arguments are apt to take the form of disputes about words" (127).

Stephen's subsequent account of the epistemological problems of materialism, including questions about knowledge of the external world and the relation between mind, matter, and the physical and psychological mechanisms of sensation, is robust and anticipates critiques of materialist metaphysics that remain tenable well over a century later (this seems, in fact, characteristic, as Stephen is generally known not as a philosophical innovator but as a skilled and perspicacious explicator; perhaps his chief contribution to English-language philosophy is the rehabilitation of the reputations of the British empiricists – Locke, Berkeley, Reid, and Hume – that would prove to be especially influential for the style, sensibility, and problem space of first generation of "analytic" philosophers). An overview of the entire argument of Stephen's lecture would prove indispensable in understanding how not only philosophical language but

concrete and contemporary philosophical *problems*, particularly the problem of knowledge, enters Woolf's thought and writing; this project has largely been accomplished by Anne Banfield in her extensive and uncommonly philosophically erudite study, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell, and the Epistemology of Modernism*.[51] Banfield's work scrutinizes above all the problem of knowledge and the logical and ontological status of unobserved entities (as well as the "self" – or, indeed, lack of self – that is the subject of the unobserved world), and it makes Stephen's influence not just on Woolf but on her philosophical contemporaries Moore, Russell, and Whitehead more than evident. The present study is devoted to the more restricted theme of materialism; as such, while there is some significant thematic and conceptual overlap with Banfield's important account of Woolf and literary and philosophical modernism, it will diverge, obviously, in the emphasis that it places on Woolf's assimilation of the idea of materialism into her conception of modern literary form.

At any rate, what we ought to observe most carefully in Stephen's presentation of materialism is how rapidly it moves from the ostensibly "objective" side – that is, the judgment that matter *qua* lifeless extended existence is the "ultimate" reality of which all else is composed – to the "subjective" side – that is, to the consciousness that makes such a judgment, to whatever mode of acquaintance with matter that such a consciousness might be said to possess. Claims about matter, in order not to be

[51] Banfield, Anne. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, and the Epistemology of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

question-begging or sheer groundless assertions (to name two of the classic skeptical objections), are inextricable from claims about the experience and especially the knowledge of matter. Hence the peculiar difficulties that attend the fateful question "what is materialism?"; unlike other unfashionable or discredited metaphysical systems, "materialism has an undoubted plausibility" (127) in virtue of the *prima facie* explanatory support it lends to the natural sciences, which (generally speaking) suppose on at least pragmatic or hypothetical grounds an external world of material things to which we have access via sensation and observation. It's a stance that is coded into the scientific method itself, in virtue of the latter's construction of fact on the foundation of what is observable and nothing else: recall Bacon's advocacy for "a form of induction [which, opposed to deductive syllogism, is "the form of demonstration which respects the senses, stays close to nature,"[52] and so on] which takes experience apart and analyzes it, and forms necessary conclusions on the basis of appropriate exclusions and rejections" (Bacon 17). As Stephen says, echoing this Baconian philosophy of science, materialism "represents … the point of view of the physical inquirer. A man is a materialist for the time being so long as he has only to do with that which may be touched, handled, seen, or otherwise perceived through the senses" (Stephen 130).

At the same time, however, the prospects for a rigorous justification of

[52] Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. p. 16

materialist metaphysics seem ever weakened by the thorny problem of exactly how this sort of access is possible – it is granted, after all, not to just another thing in the world but to a consciousness, which consciousness must *itself* be explained strictly in terms of the materialist worldview. Once again, the putatively straightforward question about the meaning of materialism requires much deeper and more complex questions about knowledge, science, experience, rationality, the human body, observation and observability, and the subject that binds these questions together. As Stephen says, explicitly articulating a commonly held empiricist view, "we know nothing directly except the modifications of our consciousness, thoughts, sensations, emotions, volitions, and so forth; and all statements of knowledge carry with them a reference, explicit or implicit, to the knower. An object without a subject is a meaningless phrase" (135). What Stephen's account makes clear is that materialism is the name, fundamentally, for a problem of self-reference, and given its misleading enshrinement of matter, it's probably not a very good name. What looks like a generic metaphysical doctrine ("there is nothing but matter, extended substance in space and time") comprises a whole theory of knowledge and philosophy of subjectivity; furthermore, this philosophy cannot plausibly be articulated in exclusively causal terms ("the subject is an effect of a specific arrangement of material components"), because even then an explanation would be required for how the mind can discover and know with certainty necessary relations of causality between material bodies. And "how," Stephen asks, "are we to state the relation between brain and mind? That they

are related is undeniable; but the boldest theorist would hesitate to state definitely what is the nature of the relation" (132-3). Stephen himself professes to remain characteristically agnostic on the issue; even today, while the nature of exactly this relation remains intensely scrutinized in an era of cognitive science and evolutionary biology, his prudence seems eminently justified.

Stephen is largely skeptical about materialism in the metaphysical sense, but less so about the prospects of an empirically – that is to say, inductively – grounded scientific realism that both makes explicit and accounts for its foundations in "the knower" who is directly acquainted only with objects of conscious awareness. If it's true that "we cannot get outside our own consciousness," (135), then genuine knowledge (of the external world, of other minds, and so on) seems too much to hope for. To confront this obstacle and controvert the standard disaster scenarios proposed by the skeptic (like those of the Cartesian *malin genie* variety), Stephen describes the process of constructing scientific knowledge from the elements of sensation through a method of reflection, which process is essentially a more sophisticated and formalized version of normal, everyday practical engagement with the world. In fact, Stephen's picture of scientific knowledge is worth presenting at length, not in order to commend or criticize it, but to begin to establish more explicitly how the complex of concepts under consideration – materialism, sensation, experience, and abstraction – enter into Woolf's language, her concept of fiction, her literary practice, and her modernist agenda.

What is the process of reflection that Stephen describes, and how does it "construct" knowledge in both ordinary and scientific milieus? "What," Stephen asks, "are we doing when we raise this vast structure of physical science, composed essentially of time and space formula" (135)? His answer is rich with imagery that readers of *To the Lighthouse* will immediately recognize, familiar as they are with young Andrew Ramsay's deceptively simple (and not altogether unboastful) explanation of Mr. Ramsay's philosophical work – "think of a table, then, when you're not there" (Woolf 2005, 27) – to the rather mystified Lily Briscoe. Stephen says in response:

> We are filling up the gaps in our immediate perceptions. Each man's experience is fragmentary, discontinuous, and narrow. He sees infinitesimal arcs, and connects them by drawing the whole circle. We extend the range and supply the intervals of our knowledge. We are doing so somehow every instant of our lives, and when we reach the furthest limits of physical science we are still doing the same. I shut my eyes for an instant, and believe that my pen and paper are still there. I believe that I should see them if my eyes were open, and that other persons may see them still. If I look back to the past, or forward to the future, or away to the furthest abysses of space, I am carrying on the same construction. I am 'producing' the curve of which a minute element is before my eyes. I form, then, a kind of hypothetical consciousness, of which my own is an essential part, but which extends indefinitely beyond it. By this artifice (if it may be called so) I state a general truth without implicit reference to my own

perceptions (135-6).

Reflection, in the sense that Stephen gives it here, is an inductive process that produces from discrete elements of sensation – like "infinitesimal arcs" of an absent circle – a truth that is independent of its having been founded in particular, limited sensations; "Kepler constructed the solar system in the same way," by placing himself "in imagination at a different point of view" (136). It is a method for passing with certainty from the observed to the unobserved. But such a method inevitably leads right to the precipice of skepticism: what is it, after all, that distinguishes the "artifice" of the hypothetical extension of the subject via reflection from the pure "abolition of the subject" that would accompany knowledge of the world outside all possible or actual experience? The materialist apparently requires just such knowledge if she is to posit a world of insensate, unthinking matter that predates even the possibility of thought or experience ("we are sometimes told that the solar system was once a 'cosmic mist,' a whirl of incoherent atoms, which has gradually shaken down into such order as we see around us," Stephen writes [148]). This is an account that can't, in his view, be disproven; but what we can coherently say we *know* about such a 'cosmic mist' is gained only through reflection, the hypothetical extension of the power of observation, not from the annihilation of subjectivity in imagination.

To speculate beyond the properly delimited boundary of the knowable, to abolish the subject and annihilate experience in an effort at genuine objectivity, is only to use words without meaning. This is, perhaps, the chief philosophical sin in

Stephen's eyes. He objects constantly to the adjudication of metaphysical questions by grammatical means, in a manner that surely recalls Hume's dissolution of philosophical problems into linguistic ones (most notably on the subjects of metaphysical and personal identity, which Hume suggests can ultimately "be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties"[53]) and anticipates a later philosophical tradition that encompasses figures like Wittgenstein and Carnap. Leslie claims that the "blind fate," to which the materialist seems committed when explaining how consciousness could have appeared in a deterministic world of sheer matter, is "a mere word" (144); he derides the materialist doctrine of sensation as "betrayed by erroneous language" (141) because it relies on a "combination of words [that] is without meaning" (142); he thinks that the fundamental premise of materialism – an invented "imaginary substratum in which sensible qualities somehow stick" – is a *verbal* attempt to abandon relation and experience by substituting a "mere name for the coherence of certain groups of sensation" (144). The essential metaphysical gesture that grants access for itself to a world beyond knowledge and experience is, in reality, a banally grammatical procedure: "the unknowable, which lies beyond, is not made into reality by its capital letter" (*ibid.*).

So, what *is* the difference between the legitimate expansion of the sphere of the knowable by the hypothetical extension of the powers of observation and the

[53] Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton. Oxford: Oxford UP 2000.

illegitimate claim on a behalf of a reality severed utterly from its being thought, sensed, or experienced? "When we speak of what happened when the solar system was still an incandescent mist, we are only extending our experience, as we do when we say that the fire is still burning in the room that we have left," Stephen writes. "To say what would or did happen," on the other hand, "outside of all experience, actual or potential – that is, supposing all experience to be annihilated – is to use words without meaning, as much as to say what I feel when I don't feel" (138-9). The materialist, ultimately, grants too much power to language by supposing the annihilation of experience; and "we escape from materialism," in large part, "by refusing to admit mere empty phrases as solutions" (147). At bottom, then, the blurry line between "extending" and "annihilating" experience is focused and refined – at least in Stephen's view – by distinguishing improper from proper uses of language. To say that the sun will rise tomorrow is a meaningful sentence, and fits with the knowledge of the movements of heavenly bodies that we have constructed on the basis of experience. To say that the sun will rise on the day after the obliteration of any possible percipient, in a world emptied of experience, on the other hand, is only to imitate meaningful words, to mistake their formal appearance for their semantic content – one may as well be writing fiction.

Eventually – asking, as we are, what materialism means in the neighborhood of Virginia Woolf's fiction – we must determine more exactly what sort of influence Stephen's quasi-empiricist understanding of the experiential roots of scientific

knowledge and practice, which undergirds his philosophical critique of materialism, might have had in Woolf's own writing. There are various possible responses to the question of this influence, with differing degrees of plausibility and in service of different argumentative programs. Certainly, Woolf scholars who have placed a special emphasis on the putative philosophical content of her novels have often felt that the requirement of demonstrating Woolf's biographical connections to philosophy – especially contemporary academic philosophy – is unavoidable. And we do know that Woolf was enthusiastically interested in contemporary philosophical debates. Moreover, as a member of Bloomsbury (with close ties to the Cambridge Apostles) she was acquainted, whether socially or as a reader, with some of the most prominent philosophers of the day. She audited lectures on Bergson delivered by her future sister-in-law Karin Costelloe, she socialized with Russell and Whitehead, not to mention Wittgenstein, and heard Moore explicate Bishop Berkeley's epistemology. Banfield convincingly writes that "Woolf … had a knowledge *ex auditu* of philosophy" (Banfield 30), and this claim is warranted by the historical record.

The idea that Woolf received some measure of philosophical education – that her knowledge *ex auditu,* while not specialist in an academic sense, was both deeper and more sophisticated than untutored interest or enthusiasm – is *a fortiori* true in the case of her relation to Leslie Stephen. There can be little doubt that Stephen's informal pedagogy played some significant role in preparing Woolf for the by all accounts rigorous philosophical conversation that would come to pervade

Bloomsbury. It may very well have been classic works of philosophy that were among those works that young Virginia would precociously make efforts at reading, in part to impress her father: "how proud, priggishly, I was, if he gave his amused little surprised snort, when he found me reading some book that no child of my age could understand. I was a snob no doubt, and read partly to make him think me a very clever little brat."[54] Woolf, who never went to university (the Stephens could only send her brothers), received informal lessons at home, and Stephen himself would read to the children on English literature, mathematics, and – almost certainly – the history of philosophy (it is widely known that in her childhood Woolf read Plato in Greek). What exactly she read of Stephen's work, later in life, is not entirely clear. It's possible she never read "What is Materialism?" though in all likelihood she had read both *An Agnostic's Apology* (which includes the "Materialism" essay) and *A History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, and probably his late work *The Utilitarians* as well. She had a keen and critical sense of Stephen as a writer. In 1940, she described his work in terms that emphasizes its ostensibly Victorian sensibility: "always cracking up sense and manliness; and crying down sentiment and vagueness. (…) That shows a very simply constructed view of the world; and the world was, I suppose, more simple then" (115). We are familiar with the antipathy for vagueness and empty words that Woolf finds in Stephen, given that it is this antipathy that's at the root of his critique

[54] Woolf, Virginia. "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Inc., 1985. pp. 111-12.

of metaphysical materialism. Woolf professed to have no special fondness for Stephen as a writer (a sentiment that is perhaps compounded by the complexity of her relation to the man himself); she writes evocatively that "he is not a writer for whom I have a natural taste. Yet just as a dog takes a bite of grass, I take a bite of him medicinally, and there often steals in, not a filial, but a reader's affection for him; for his courage, his simplicity, for his strength and nonchalance, and neglect of appearances" (115-6). Given all this, it seems that under the constraints of strict historical accuracy one would be justified enough to surmise that the language of materialism enters Woolf's critical writing and aesthetic doctrine through Stephen. If she devoted any significant length of time to pondering materialism as a philosophical or a metaphysical problem, or subjected the essay "What is Materialism?" to careful scrutiny, however, then she left no written record of having done so.

It is possible, however, to defend the claim that what Woolf recognized in the idea of materialism was in fact an urgent aesthetic problem, and that as a problem it was visible especially in relation to the history and the future of the novel. So far, this argument has proceeded by elaborating some historical and biographical links between Woolf and her philosophical context. But that elaboration cannot amount to a demonstration, and in any case it is possible to outline the argument about the aesthetic dimensions of the problem of materialism in Woolf's fiction without further appeal to the authority of archival reason. In order to do so we should first emphasize that the notion of materialism analyzed by Stephen follows an itinerary from claims

about immediate material existence – e.g., the everyday objects that populate the world around us and persist in the absence of our powers of perception – to claims about the subject which, by means of the constructive power of reflection, forms conclusions about the material world, and finally to an image of the total annihilation of subjectivity – a world emptied of selves and percipients. It's in this image of a lifeless material world, a paradoxical imagination of the destruction of self and memory, perception and consciousness, that materialism terminates; for Stephen it's an image that is epistemologically empty and composed with meaningless words, akin to describing the feeling of complete anaesthesia or the consciousness of being unconscious. Genuine knowledge is rooted in abstraction, but so is the fiction of the materialist worldview. A boundary needs to be drawn within abstraction in order to secure the possibility of real knowledge and ward of the exuberance of what amounts to wordplay: "I abstract from my own consciousness, but not from consciousness itself. I cannot get into a world outside of all experience" (Stephen 143-44).

This itinerary has, undoubtedly, an aesthetic and an artistic significance that can be traced throughout Woolf's fiction and especially in *To the Lighthouse*, the novel in which her father and his life's work are so explicitly portrayed in the figure of the brilliant, demanding, and ultimately aggrieved philosopher Mr. Ramsay. But what must be considered above all is that the conceptual links forged around the problem of materialism, which we have observed in Stephen's work, are constructed on the basis of the relations between experience, abstraction, language, and fiction. To the extent

that this is so, we have good reason to treat the complex of philosophical issues circulating around materialism not only as autobiographical material that has made its way to the surface of her (not coincidentally) most autobiographical work of fiction – not, in other words, solely as a matter of content (the character of Mr. Ramsay and other characters' various impressions of the man and his work) or theme ("subject and object and the nature of reality" [Woolf 2005, 26]). On the contrary, these issues likewise resonate at the level of novelistic form, and the problem of materialism in *To the Lighthouse* can consequently be understood as a crucial aspect of how that novel portrays itself in relation to both the history and the formal limits of its genre. It's in this sense that the questionable status of materialism becomes central to Woolf's efforts at either describing or composing a modern novel. Woolf appropriates the language of materialism in order to test the limits of abstraction in the novel, to mark the boundary between (to borrow Stephen's pointed comparison) abstraction from individual consciousness and the total abstraction from all consciousness, the effective annihilation of subjectivity. At what point along this trajectory are words emptied of meaning, and where does novel capture rather than destroy or erase what it means above all to convey?

This will turn out to be one of the central aesthetic problems faced by *To the Lighthouse*. We are, of course, familiar, with the various ways in which Woolf describes the object of modern fiction, "life" itself. Recall that Woolf specifically indicts "materialism" as a style unconsciously embraced by her Edwardian rivals, principally

Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells: "for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (Woolf 1984, 149). Woolf writes that "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" and that it is a "varying...unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" which the novelist is tasked with conveying (150). Perhaps echoing her father's contention that "each man's experience is fragmentary, discontinuous, and narrow," Woolf notoriously advocates on behalf of the modern novelist: "let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (*ibid.*). (It's not without interest, we note in passing, just how suffused Woolf's anti-materialism is with the language of a certain materiality, not just in its atomism but in its figuration of consciousness as a substance capable of being "scored" by an external action.) And, like Stephen's materialist, those writers who do indeed "fill in the gaps," who perhaps emphatically do "take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (*ibid.*) risk obscuring or annihilating "the proper stuff of fiction" (*ibid.*) through blind adherence to the conventions of plot, probability, and verisimilitude.

Of course, the lesson towards which Woolf builds her modernist critique of

materialist fiction is precisely that, insofar as fiction must strive to convey in its minuteness the "incessant shower of atoms," (*ibid.*) and so to "transmute" the sensibilia of life into literature, "'the proper stuff of fiction' does not exist" (154). This is just the logical consequence of the apparent circumstance that "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought," when "every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon," and "when no perception comes amiss" (*ibid.*). Given this near-absolute broadening of the scope of fiction in the enthusiastic attempt to render every fluctuation of sensation in the name of life, the novel is formally exploded, affording the enthusiastic modernist with "a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing – no 'method', no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence" (*ibid.*).

These words and the unbridled enthusiasm for the ostensibly new project for literature upon which they alight are perhaps exceedingly familiar to contemporary readers of Woolf and of modernism more generally. We recall them here, however, to recast their significance vis-à-vis the renewal of materialism as an aesthetic problem in *To the Lighthouse*. Above, we suggested that questions about this aesthetic materialism address both the formal limits and the historical development of the novel as a genre. This is because Woolf makes explicit the premise that her father had left for the most part implicit: that materialism really concerns how language may be used. Obviously the words of the philosopher involve epistemological commitments and constraints

from which the words of the novelist are freed; but it clearly is the case, for Woolf, that there is an urgently relevant distinction to be made between language that conveys life most fully and language which is false or which dissimulates its falsity by pretension and artifice. It may well be the case that Woolf was motivated to elaborate this distinction in order to preserve the domain of fiction from the scorn that Stephen pours on the "empty words" and "meaningless phrases" of misguided philosophers. In any event, it's possible to see the writer of "Modern Fiction" directing her energy toward this preservation by presenting forms of language that abstract too far from the experience of reality which they have aimed, and which novelists historically have always aimed, at reproducing – in a manner analogous to Stephen's materialist whose words are empty because they aim at representing a reality devoid of all subjectivity. "Pretense" in this sense stands as much for falsity, or in fact giving falsehood and artifice the appearance of the true, as it does for the techniques and traditions handed down by novelists putting accepted principles into practice: "the writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour" (149). It is no accident that such fiction only manages to portray corpses embalmed or dolls in want of life; Woolf's repeated association of materialist fiction with clothing or fashion – as in the "ill-

fitting vestments" it provides for its subject matter or here in the "fashion of the hour" come alive – is likewise telling. It betrays the materialist fixation on seemly surfaces, and condemns the writer whose work is no different from that of the mortician who paints and dresses a cadaver.

Once materialism has been recast into a problem about the aesthetic validity of language in literature, we can see more clearly how it co-implicates form and history in the genre of the novel. "Modern Fiction" presents an argument about how novels have been written and how they ought now to be written in order to endure (it is Woolf, as we saw above, who must hypothetically "extend" her consciousness beyond simple awareness of the present in order to form judgments about works like Baring's novel *C*, presumably alongside the novels of Bennett and his ilk, which "won't exist in 2026"). But we also see that the very concept of the novel is open to critical reflection and practical negotiation. The questions with which Woolf opens her critique of materialism in fiction ("Is life like this? Must novels be like this? [*ibid.*]) are answered with a resounding "no." The historical position of the novel in thrall to tradition and false language can be rectified *formally* by recognizing "the infinite possibilities of the art." This exuberance about the possibilities of the modern novel is inevitably linked with a conception of the formal boundaries of the novel as such.

It's this, finally, that returns us to a consideration of abstraction, now transformed from an epistemological into an aesthetic technique, and perhaps as well a destiny for modern art. We said above that the epistemological status of abstraction

in Stephen's empiricist account of knowledge – which insists on the admissibility of knowledge based on abstraction from *my* consciousness but not from consciousness or subjectivity *tout court* – anticipates the complex status of abstraction in Woolf's fiction and criticism. It has generally been thought that strategy of the novel is to depict in robust realistic detail the lives of individuals; more generally speaking, it has been thought that the notion of "experience" inheres in narrative as a category (and so encompassing narratives both true and fictional). Such inherence explains what makes narratives intelligible as narratives, as reports about events and actions unfolding in time, opposed to the ostensibly non-narrative realm of, say, mathematical formulae and empty, undifferentiated temporal continuums.[55] And it is abstraction in language, which entails the construction in fiction of a "view from no one," that we will argue is the central aesthetic problem faced by *To the Lighthouse*. And it's a problem because it will come to seem both intrinsic to the novel as a form and, at the same time, to risk repeating the errors of materialist pretense, pretending that death is life. It might even come to seem that this pretense, the ornament applied to a world emptied of life, is indistinguishable from the very nature of art.

[55] These characterizations of the novel and of narrative more broadly construed mask issues of considerable historical and conceptual complexity – so considerable that entire sub-disciplines of (predominantly) literary study have grown around the questions and problems attendant on the categories here invoked. It is not my aim to downplay the complexity of a category like narrative or the discipline devoted to its study, narratology, nor to impose unwanted and over-general "definitions" of the novel and so to mute the discussions about the history of the novel that have developed from the accounts of critics Ian Watt and Michael McKeon to the present (Franco Moretti's idiosyncratic project of reformulating this history deserves mention in this light). On the other hand, the generality of the claim being made here – i.e., that both the novel as a historical artistic genre and narrative as a category (structural/socio-cultural/semantic/cognitive, or whatever the case may be) have deep and perhaps even irreducible relations to familiar versions of the concept of experience.

It might be tempting to see Woolf's writing as part of a more general critique of abstraction in service of preserving the immediacy of life, feeling, experience, or sensation. There are canonical views of modernist art that place it squarely in relation to a philosophical traditions that were motivated primarily by the effort to rectify the abstraction of experience effected either by pernicious forms of concept-governed rationality (as in Nietzsche or Bergson) or by the realization of abstraction that accompanied the onset of capitalist modernity (as in Marx or Weber).[56] This view sees in modernism, or at least in certain of its most notorious exemplars, the goal of achieving the "direct recovery of immediate experience and the invention of new forms that reorder experience" (Schwarz 50). We will see that the status of abstraction in Woolf's fiction, however, is a matter of some complexity. If truly everything is now to be the "proper stuff of fiction," then extreme experimentation with the presentation of experience in the novel is licensed – and it's not even clear that "experience" remains an absolute constraint upon what's possible in the novel. The critic Stephen Kern has recently provided a brief but useful account of *To the Lighthouse* in relation to modernist textual abstraction, which he believes to be "the most revolutionary stylistic development of the modernist period."[57] Woolf, Kern notes, "never wrote an abstract novel," presumably because he supposes total

[56] A good source for the philosophical critique of abstraction vis-à-vis experience around the turn of the century is Schwartz, Sanford. *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early 20th-Century Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985. Schwartz's explanation focuses predominantly on Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, and the British Hegelian F.H. Bradley.

[57] Kern, Stephen. *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. p. 167

abstraction to be impossible in the novel form: "abstract art avoids the clichés associated with conventional themes and familiar objects, but literature can never entirely dispense with words or replace recognizable subject matter" (*ibid.*). All the same, Woolf "invokes the abstractionist position in *To the Lighthouse*." She refers in her diary to "Time Passes," the characterless middle section of the novel, as "the most difficult abstract piece of writing" which presents "the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to" (172).[58] Since the section is not, in Kern's eyes, abstract, it is better understood as "abstractionist." He goes on to describe the art of the painter Lily Briscoe in terms of its abstractness (it is more exactly post-Impressionist) and its effort, analogous to Woolf's own literary one, to "get hold of … that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything" (*ibid.*).[59] But here there is something unclear in Kern's admittedly quite brief assessment of Woolf's "abstractionism." Lily's thought highlights quite explicitly the discrepancy between the thing itself, whatever it is that scores consciousness in the very moment of this scoring, and the artistic process of *making* that performs an abstraction of its own. We might be tempted to call the representation of that thing itself abstract when it departs in some radical way from the artistic codes and conventions that have governed ostensibly non-abstract, mimetic art, as in the single brushstroke of a tree or the purple triangle of Mrs. Ramsay in Lily's own painting. But

[58] Bell, ed. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three* 76
[59] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 193.

perhaps in Lily's understanding of her work we find a tension within abstraction itself. Is the work of making art capturing or destroying that thing she seeks? Is she depicting reality at its most elemental, breaking with the banalities of tradition and verisimilitude, or embalming life on the canvas?

Excursus: Abstraction and Experience

We have now encountered a few times the idea that experience forms the outer conceptual and practical constraint on the prospects for abstract art, and especially the prospects for the composition of an abstract novel. It would be far beyond the scope of the present argument to examine this idea in any detail or with any historical or critical accuracy. We won't be sidetracked too far, however, if we pause to consider how experience was understood to play a role in the genesis and formalization of abstract art around the turn of the last century, according to two important and philosophically astute critics – one writing at the cusp of the arrival of avant-gardism in the novel and one assessing the place of nonrepresentational painting in the contemporary artworld (and by extension the canon of European painting). What follows is a brief and unlikely comparison that should serve to illuminate the stakes of abstraction in Woolf's work – particularly the recurrence, throughout *To the Lighthouse*, of an image of the world without a self, a view from no one around which the only narrative that might coalesce is the bare passage of time – whose attitude toward its own acts of making are sometimes surprisingly ambivalent.

One of the most influential proto-modernist descriptions of the novel belongs to the Hungarian philosopher Gyorgy Lukács, who in his postwar (1920) work *Theory of the Novel* famously wrote that "the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel hero's psychology is the mature man's knowledge that meaning can never penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality."[60] Lukács elaborates a vision of modernity that would today be recognized in terms of its proximity to the so-called "secularization thesis:" that is, the notion that European modernity as a historical, cultural, and intellectual category can be defined by its translation or transposition of archaic religious sources into secular, hence modern, analogues.[61] Within this interpretive framework, the novel, as the modern literary form *par excellence*, becomes the cultural record of a world devoid of transcendent, divinely authorized meaning, which world in turn ironically sanctions the "demonic," fallen individual's attempts to reinscribe meaning. This description of the novel depends on a specifically modern conception of the world as bewilderingly meaningless or chaotic, waiting to be formed and ordered by a merely surrogate God. (Actually, Woolf's vision of the world – what she at one point thinks of in terms of a genuine philosophy, is already not so

[60] Lukács, Gyorgy. *The Theory of the Novel.* Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974.
[61]Among the most prominent "secularization" claims belong to Feuerbach, Weber, and Löwith; more recent versions of the origins of modern scientific rationality from ecclesiastical or theological sources include Funkenstein, Amos. *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the 17th Century.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986 and Gaukroger, Stephen. *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210-1685.* Oxford: Oxford, UP 2009. See also Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

far from ideas of the sort that Lukács proposes. In her memoir "Sketches of the Past", she refers to "what I might call a philosophy; at any rate … a constant idea of mine; […] that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" [Woolf 1985, 72]). The experience of this world, as the experience of modernity, is what structures the adventures of the novel's hero: "the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself" (89). In Lukács's analysis, therefore, the metaphysics of the novel (its representation of the modern protagonist's formation of an intrinsically formless world) is expressed most distinctly in the category of experience. The novel not only reproduces formally and stylistically the vagaries of an individual's conscious awareness of her worldly milieu, but claims to record that individual's "gaining" of experience as an increased capacity to understand and to negotiate that milieu (since experience, as Martin Jay notes in his intellectual history of the concept, likewise "connote(s) a worldliness that has left innocence behind by facing and surmounting the dangers and challenges that life may present"). [62]

It is remarkable that at the other end of modernism as an international movement in the visual arts, the great critic Clement Greenberg would rely on a

[62]Jay, Martin. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2005. p. 10

conception of art surprisingly similar to the young Lukacs's in order to describe not the faithful *realization* of modern individualistic experience in art but precisely its *revocation* in avant-garde abstraction. But even at the height of abstraction, painterly abstraction will draw at least implicitly on the contents of conscious experience. In his influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in the *Partisan Review* in 1939, Greenberg explains that

> "[i]t has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'nonobjective' art – and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something *given,* increate, independent of meanings, similars, or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself."[63]

Greenberg goes on to conclude that "the genesis of the abstract" is effected when the "absolute" sought by the artist in her characteristically modern attempt to detach her work from the bourgeois sensibilities of the public sphere[64] is recognized to be a

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[63] Greenberg, Clement. "Avant Garde and Kitsch," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944.* Ed. John O'Brien. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. p. 8

[64] (Greenberg 7-8); in Greenberg's view, there is a kind of originally political motivation behind the formation of the avant-garde, even if (1) this remains a more or less negative moment (as Greenberg writes of "the first settlers of bohemia," "without the circulation of revolutionary ideas in the air about them, they would never have been able to isolate their concept of the "bourgeois" in order to define what they were *not*" [7]), and (2) this political moment is essentially repudiated by an avant-garde that ultimately demanded total detachment from base social and cultural values in the name of true art.

paradoxically relative absolute – it is an absolute conceived by and in art, within its autonomous terrain – "and so [the artist] turns out to be imitating, not God … but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves" (8). This imitation turns away from the world of experience, but it also sets for itself a constraint in the name of "aesthetic validity."[65] Since it can no longer draw on either the public sphere and its politics or on the familiar orders of everyday experience for its constraint, it must find its organizational principles immanently, in the very processes of creation: "this constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in *the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former*. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature."[66] The great modernists of both visual art and literature ought to be understood, on Greenberg's account, of adhering to an "imitation of imitation."

What we should note is that Lukács and Greenberg place "experience" in similar positions at the heart of their explanatory endeavors, in order to draw distinct conclusions about the art of the modern world. There is a shared conviction that art – whether in the form of a novel or a painting – is to be understood in terms of how

[65]Greenberg's use of the terminology of "aesthetic validity" (8), along with the fact that he appears to accept whatever sort of validity this may be as *prima facie* uncontroversial, perhaps demands a longer remark than can be accommodated here. A charitable interpretation of this notion might go something like this: we take it for granted that not all objects are worthy of the name art; if we view some objects as deserving the kind of consideration and attention that we by custom grant to artworks, then it follows that that object possesses some kind of "aesthetic validity." In this sense, saying of something that it is art is already to make an aesthetic judgment. (This interpretation helps to make some sense of Greenberg's claim, I think, though it leaves much detail obscure – perhaps above all the tricky question about whether aesthetic validity is an intrinsic or a formal property of an artwork or whether it is merely communally agreed upon or bestowed by some external agent, like an "artworld" and whatever institutions the latter may comprise.)

[66] *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

and whether it enshrines or renounces experience; even the avant-garde renunciation of experience in abstraction and non-representational artworks depends on a *positive* conception of experience imitated in art just in order for the process of that imitation to be purified of subject matter (for Greenberg, this is true of both visual and literary modernism; he includes in his account painters from Picasso and Kandinsky to Klee and Cézanne who "derive inspiration from the medium they work in," exhibiting a "pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors," as well as poets like Pound, Hart Crane, Stevens, and Mallamé ["even...Yeats"] whose work is supposedly "centered … on the 'moments' themselves of poetic creation, rather than on experience to be converted into poetry"[67]).

We have so far tried to develop an account that emphasizes the importance of the aesthetics of abstraction in Woolf's fiction, and especially how the latter evolved as a response to the problem of materialism in literature. It has been easy to see how in Woolf's eyes the latter is guilty of destroying experience (and its attendant forms – consciousness, life, sensation, and so on). It is not the case, however, that Woolf

[67](Greenberg 9). It is of no small importance that Greenberg appends the following *caveat* to this description of the modernist poets: "of course, this cannot exclude other preoccupations in their work, for poetry must deal with words, and words must communicate." This communicative power is a threat to the power of poetry to effect genuine abstraction, mitigating its capacity to relate to its medium in the manner of supposedly "pure preoccupation" that Greenberg attributes to modernist painters. These are claims that will demand serious attention by any attempt, like mine, to delineate the theme of materialism in modernist literature, *especially* in modernist fiction (which, it can easily be argued, stands in an even more complexly mediated relationship to its medium than does poetry; as Ian Watt notes in his seminal account of "formal realism" in the novel, the latter depends on a "more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" [Watt 32]).

would rectify materialism in the name of experience alone, even if her critical rhetoric typically suggests that this is precisely her aim. The fact remains that the destruction of experience wrought by the materialists is not so easy for Woolf to dispense with; in what follows, we will attempt to see why.

The (Empty) Form of the Sentence

Around 1956, W.H. Auden wrote that "a sentence uttered makes a world appear / where all things happen as it says they do."[68] The world-making power of even the most banal of sentences certainly seems to lie at the heart of literary creation, but Woolf's feelings about sentences stand in some contrast to this picture of things. In "Modern Fiction," Woolf warns modern writers that in order to capture the fleeting variation of conscious life they ought strive "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible" (Woolf 1984, 150). At the same time, in Woolf's eyes there exists the distinct and compelling worry that language is itself "alien and external" to what it labors ceaselessly to nail down. At the heart of the sentence's creative and constructive power is the eternal threat of destruction; if sentences may make worlds appear, they may at the same time annihilate the life that belongs to that world. There are at least two senses in which it's possible to think

[68]Auden, W.H. "Words," in *Collected Poems.* New York: Vintage 1991. p. 624

about this linguistic destructiveness in Woolf: the first is literary-historical and the second is, for want of a better word, metaphysical. In the first sense, the sentence as the bearer of or the material for individual style poses a threat to artistic originality. In a diary entry dated the 8th of April 1925, Woolf records her characteristic and recurrent worry about the fate of her work (in this instance, *Mrs. Dalloway*) after having read Proust for the first time: "I wonder if this time I have achieved something? Well, nothing anyhow compared with Proust … and he will I suppose both influence me and make me out of temper with every sentence of my own" (Woolf 1980, 7). Here it is the Proustian sentence that is alien and external, not to life but to Woolf's own work, a foreign substance that threatens to incorporate itself into the body of Woolf's prose.

We encounter the stronger sense of the destructive tendency of the sentence and of language more broadly in a later diary entry written during Woolf's preparation for composing *To the Lighthouse*. In a moment of extraordinary significance for understanding Woolf's own attitudes toward both the process of composition and the meaning of her art, she devotes herself in July 1926 to "writ[ing] the greatest book in the world." She expands on the entailments of this singular ambition in the following manner:

> "This is what the book would be that was made entirely [,] solely and with integrity of one's thoughts. Suppose one could catch them before they became 'works of art.'? Catch them hot and sudden as they rise in the mind – walking

> up Asheham hill for instance. Of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow and deluding. One must stop to find a word; then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it" (102).

That idea about the "form of the sentence," empty and in want of content, a figure of both the demands of writing and the distortion that written words exert on life, recurs in various forms throughout Woolf's writing. An early memoir, "Reminiscences," seems to invoke it in anticipation of the later complaint about the clothing-language of the materialists: "written words of a person who is dead or still alive tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life" (Woolf 1985, 36).[69] Another, less frequently cited assessment of modern fiction collected with "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader*, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," complains that "book after book leaves us with the same sense of promise unachieved, of intellectual poverty, of brilliance which has been snatched from life but not transmuted into literature. Much of what is best in contemporary work has the appearance of being noted under pressure, taken down in a bleak shorthand" (Woolf 1984, 237). Perhaps that "bleak shorthand" belonged to Woolf herself: she was well familiar with the extreme contrast between the speed with which consciousness alters and the slowness of the pen attempting to accomplish its alchemical transmutation into art. When in *To the Lighthouse* the novelist-surrogate Lily

[69] Woolf, Virginia. "Reminiscences," in *Moments of Being*. New York: Harcourt, 1985.

expresses the desire to genuinely, really, know Mrs. Ramsay, she can only think of this knowledge in terms of the obliteration of any mediating relationship that language might introduce, for "it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge" (Woolf 2005, 54). Hardly could a written character disdain more strongly the act of creation that brought her, as it were, into being. Lily's wish to know "the thing itself' is among the clearest examples of Woolf's own ideas about art and the difficulties to which it is exposed in its own making.

But this difficulty only exists because of the nature of the relationship between language and life, which introduces a delay between the moment lived in its minuteness and the attempt to compose the former in writing, or which substitutes a concept for a feeling and so erases whatever it was that had originally motivated the substitution. At the moment of creation, the destruction of life is risked; perhaps it is unavoidable. At an important moment in *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa Dalloway's former lover Peter Walsh is walking around midday along Whitehall in London when a corps of "boys in uniform, carrying guns" marches past him.[70] The narrator's free indirect discourse describes how Walsh sees "on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (Woolf 2003, 239). The laudatory language of memorial statuary entombs

[70] Woolf, Virginia. *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader*. Ed. Francine Prose. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2003. p. 239

the lives sacrificed in the name of heroic duty and patriotism; it's the same language, perhaps, that will suffuse the imagination of Mr. Ramsay pacing around the Ramsay's home on Skye, fretting about his work and his legacy while occasionally clamoring the words of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade." The thought of young men sent to their doom – "someone had blundered" – occasions for Ramsay the justification of his own worry about the future of his philosophical fame tinged with the fantasy of a heroic death that might live on in song. "It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter," Ramsay thinks. And

> "Who then could blame the leader of that forlorn party which after all has climbed high enough to see the waste of the years and the perishing of stars, if before death stiffens his limbs beyond the power of movement he does a little consciously raise his numbed fingers to his brown, and square his shoulders, so that when the search party comes they will find him dead at his post, the fine figure of a solider? (…) Who shall blame him, if, so standing for a moment, he dwells upon fame, upon search parties, upon cairns raised by grateful followers over his bones?"(Woolf 2005, 39).

Ramsay imagines his own mortification, his afterlife as a statue, and wonders if the words he has left behind can adequately portray the reality of his philosophical genius. The narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway*, describing the young soldiers on Whitehall marching past Peter Walsh, "weedy for the most part, boys of sixteen," leads readers toward similar conclusions about the value of words chiseled onto monuments. Their

marching suggests to Peter that they move as if "one will worked arms and legs uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irreticences, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline … There they go, thought Peter Walsh … and all the exalted statues, Nelson, Gordon, Havelock, the black, the spectacular images of great soldiers stood looking ahead of them, as if they too had made the same renunciation" (Woolf 2003, 239-40). The narrative view that observes the eradication of life in the soldiers' disciplined march, that sees them mirrored by the statues lining the street, is certainly a melancholic one; it finds in the words of poets and sculptors that might praise duty, heroism, and love of country only an elegy for the walking dead.

These images of lifeless materiality that pervade Woolf's writing about writing – corpses, statues, rock cairns – are especially revealing. Above, we supposed that the central aesthetic problem in *To the Lighthouse* (which we have here seen anticipated in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well) revolved around the problematic status of abstraction. Here we see Ramsay imagining a world without himself in it, which is again both a formal exercise in abstraction (as in Leslie Stephen's hypothetical extension of his own consciousness) and a historical anxiety about the act of writing and the precarious place of written work in the world. But it's tempting to wonder whether these images betray an even deeper worry that materialism might exhaust the scope of the novel or even art as such, given its reliance on the magic of making the dead come alive, and its construction of a literally "spectacular" world in which statues have quickened eyes

with which to look ahead. Towards the conclusion of the lengthy dinner scene in "The Window," the opening section of *To the Lighthouse*, the narrator is focalizing through Mrs. Ramsay, who as always is attuned to the shifting moods of her husband. Finding him to be "in great spirits tonight," her attention wanders to the "window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black;" and at this moment, "looking at that outside the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices in a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words." Her husband begins reciting a poem – "he was repeating something, and she knew it was poetry from the rhythm and the ring of exultation, and melancholy in his voice ... The words (she was looking out the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves" (112). Perhaps this is the perfect image of the tension Woolf finds in her literary language: abstract sound without meaning, voiced by no one, uncreated, appearing in the world as might any other object one could find floating on the waves, but no less expressive of the power of language – especially, perhaps, in Woolf's reconfiguration of narrative language – to fix a moment or to make a scene. Mrs. Ramsay feels though the words, even though "she did not know what they meant," seemed "to be spoken by her own voice, outside herself." When the voice stops and the party begins to disperse, Mrs. Ramsay rises to leave but waits on the room's threshold for "a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it

changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past" (113-14).

Earlier in *To the Lighthouse*, the two "allies" Lily Briscoe and William Bankes – artist and scientist, among the Ramsays's circle of friends and family on holiday in Scotland – are discussing the Ramsays and their children during an evening walk. The words exchanged are left mostly unreported by the narrator's free indirect discourse, and the difficulty in discerning which of the characters's thoughts might be left unvoiced serves to establish early on the often tenuous boundary that the novel draws between the public and the private. We know, for instance that Bankes expresses *something* about his childhood friend Mr. Ramsay in this conversation, because we are provided with a rare direct quotation of Lily's response (entreating Bankes to "think of his work!"). But whether Bankes's questions about the brilliant but flawed Ramsay ("What would a stranger think now? What did this Lily Briscoe think? Could one help noticing that habits grew on him? Eccentricities, weaknesses perhaps? It was astonishing that a man of his intellect could stoop so low as he did – but that was too harsh a phrase – could depend so much as he did upon people's praise" [26]) unfold fully in conversation, or whether they form part of a private reflection, is difficult if not impossible to decide. "What did this Lily Briscoe think?" might be the narrative representation of a question that Bankes addresses to Lily: "what do you think?" The use of the determiner "this" to pick out Lily Briscoe, on the other hand, suggests an inner voice that Bankes keeps, at least in part, to himself.

In any case, what Lily *does* "think" is a matter of considerably more complexity than might initially be imagined. Soon after Lily reminds Bankes of Ramsay's philosophical brilliance (and by doing so betraying her memorable conception about the contrary objects of art and philosophy: "naturally," she supposes, "if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver..., naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person" [27]), their conversation about how to judge Ramsay's character is for Lily interrupted by a judgment of a different sort. In a seeming flash, Lily is overcome with affection for the older Bankes, respectable and fine, whose demeanor is the perfect counterpoint to Ramsay's demanding eccentricity and self-absorption. Narrative time slows to capture in fine detail the catalogue of Lily's impressions during this moment of affection. "Suddenly, as if the movement of [Bankes's] hand had released it," says the narrator, "the load of her accumulated impressions of him tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him. That was one sensation. Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being. That was another" (27).

This accumulation of impressions adds further emphasis to the problematic boundary between the public and the private that has been playing out over the course of the passage. Our words for feeling are, of course, publicly available; when someone says that they "like" another – as Lily certainly does "like" Bankes, even if as she articulates this feeling to herself she "simultaneously" remembers "how he had

brought a valet all the way up here; objected to dogs on chairs; would prose for hours...about salt in vegetables and the iniquity of English cooks" (28) –they know that what liking means is also a matter of knowing how the words "to like" are properly used and publicly defined. On the other hand, Lily is vexed by the multiplicity of private impressions, memories, and ideas that ultimately lead one to use public words to denote some elusive and often fleeting inner feeling; she asks herself "how then did it work out all this? How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all?" (28). Here the problem of making the private public, and of understanding the private meanings and impressions behind even the most trivial uses of everyday language, makes itself felt.

The metaphor chosen by the narrator to describe this state of affairs is therefore especially important, and will serve to indicate how this negotiation of the distinction between the public and the private is intrinsically related to the question of materialism in Woolf. Immediately upon asking herself how one "add[s] up this and that" to articulate feeling in public domain of communicative discourse, Lily stands "transfixed" as "impressions poured in upon her of those two men [i.e., Bankes and Ramsay], and to follow her thoughts," the narrator tells us, "was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil..." [28]. There is something almost contradictory in this description of the speed and elusiveness of Lily's thought, especially since the narrator has just shown in some detail the order of Lily's

impressions of liking Bankes (even if the duration of these fully individuated impressions in narrative time remains unclear). Of no small importance, however, is the role that even the technology of writing – here, the pencil – plays. The private contours of Lily's experience remain private at least in part because they are physically inaccessible; they cannot be inscribed into some external material support (hence made public) because the speed of their unfolding outstrips the fairly primitive writing technology of a pencil manipulated, and constrained, by a human hand. In other words, it is not just the sentence as such but also writing technology that here serves to articulate the difference between the public and the private. The metaphor appears to suggest that if a system capable of transcribing the speed and the quality of Lily's thought were available, a central condition of publicity would thereby be met. As such, the quality and the experience of thinking and feeling are linked to and mediated by the capacity of these thoughts and feelings to be mechanically recorded or reproduced.

Conspicuous by their absence, therefore, are the new sorts of "writing" technologies that could adequately have served to record and store the "voice" of Lily's thought. Given this conspicuous absence, it is tempting, and perhaps necessary, to understand this textual sequence in the light of the "historic shift" around 1900 that the philosopher and media theorist Friedrich Kittler describes as a movement "from imagination to data processing, from the arts to the particulars of information

technology and physiology."[71] In his major work *Discourse Networks 1800/1900,* Kittler articulates this thesis of a historic shift (or what he also calls a "paradigm shift," adopting the explicitly Kuhnian term of art that makes the meaning of this shift[72] – no mere contingent historical variation – emphatic) in expansive theoretical and archival detail which, in some of its particulars, is directly relevant to an understanding of Woolf's scene of imagined inscription. Despite the fact that Kittler's literary sources are predominantly (but not always) German, the technical and medial landscape that he portrays can certainly be adapted to discussions of international modernism generally and British modernism particularly, as several critics have made clear.[73]

Michael North, for example, has argued that "beginning with photography, (…) [new] recording media pose a fundamental challenge to literature and the arts, confusing writing and images by confounding the seemingly elementary distinction between language and perception." On this basis, North goes on to suggest that even "Modernism itself, as a panartistic movement, begins with the critical interrogation of

[71] Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.* Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford: CA, Stanford UP, 1999. p. 73

[72] Kittler, Friedrich. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900.* Trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1990. p. 214 *et passim*.

[73] See, for example: Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Armstrong's text builds on Kittler's analysis (alongside the art historian and theorist Jonathan Crary's account of visual attention around the turn of the century in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*) of Gertrude Stein and Leon Solomon's well-known 1896 text on automatic writing, published when both were students of the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, entitled "Normal Motor Automatism." Claiming that "once one begins to look for the dynamics of attention, distraction [i.e., Crary's themes], and automaticity [Kittler's] in modernist texts, they appear widespread" (203), Armstrong brings modernist writers like Yeats, Eliot, Williams, and West under consideration.

the relationship between text and image, brought equally into literature and the visual arts by mechanical recording."[74] (*Camera Works* 11-12). The images of thinking and feeling, which *To the Lighthouse* portrays in Lily's attempt to process the inner complexity of associations and impressions linked with a single word, are constructed in part by the media technology that are available to represent them; the boundaries of the private are not historically absolute, as they are technologically and materially demarcated. This demarcation indexes the modernism of *To the Lighthouse* to the massive shifts in media technology that occurred around the turn of the century. Woolf was by no means immune from contemporary excitement about a technological future that might completely revise our understanding of consciousness and the mind, as when she imagines a "wireless of memory" capable of returning a past seemingly lost forever back to present experience:

> "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 the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and

[74] North, Michael. *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. pp. 11-12

it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start" (Woolf 1985, 67). It might be more appropriate, though, to see in this fantasy of technological access to the past as it was actually lived less a sheer enthusiasm for the powers of recording machines than a thinly veiled reflection on the novel, and the destruction at the heart of its creative power to fix the past in view. It may be the case that if every elemental feeling is floating around in the subjectless world of matter, and if such feelings can be transmitted by machine, then the purview of the modern novel would be eradicated; this is a clue, it might be supposed, to why Woolf describes a future in which bad novels aren't merely unread but non-existent. These ideas about technological innovation and the physicality or substantial existence of intense feelings are as much a part of Woolf's picture of the novel itself as they are genuine speculations about the future of wireless devices. If anything, they make the boundaries and the possibilities of the form more concrete and more urgent a concern for the writer. The image of physical matter and its technological manipulation that it projects can easily stand for the risks and the promises of fiction addressed to modern life.

Accordingly, it would be misleading to dissolve too completely the separation between the mental and the material that this passage enacts. Indeed, there is a tension between two interpretations that Lily's unwritten inner voice licenses. Either it is the case that this inner voice demands more advanced forms of technological

representation, or it will *always* be held partially in reserve, inaccessible by pencil and sound recording alike. We have tried to demonstrate that in Woolf's view the latter is the case. However compelling the attempts on the part of theorists of modernism and media to promote a vision of the modern novel mediated by its ostensibly material conditions, they miss the complexity and the ambivalence with which a writer like Woolf negotiates the problem of materialism. If they are eager to demonstrate how the real conditions of the technological and media landscape affect, mediate, and constitute, in various ways, they risk missing the nuance with which Woolf has likewise tried to understand the nature of modern fiction. In another of *To the Lighthouse*'s important early passages, the issues which are central to this attempt are dramatized around the status of objects of memory. Recalling friends, the Mannings, that Mrs. Ramsay had not seen in fifteen years, she imagines herself as a ghostly presence in a scene (Herbert Manning killing a wasp with a teaspoon) that "was still going on," that in other words has some real, independent existence apart from its being remembered. "Now" Mrs. Ramsay "went among them like a host; and it fascinated her, as if, while she had changed, that particular day, now become very still and beautiful, had remained there, all these years" (Woolf 2005, 89-90). If it seems to Mrs. Ramsay not only "out of the question" but genuinely "impossible" that the Mannings are building a new billiard room, as Mr. Bankes reports, this is because her vision of the past does not allow for it to co-exist with the present unless its stillness and beauty should be irretrievably lost. Woolf's fantasy of a wireless of memory is

therefore only part of a broader and more complicated attempt to understand the manner in which the novel both preserves and annihilates experience. The machine that "turns up" August 1890 and Mrs. Ramsay's displeasure at the "extraordinary" thought that "they had been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more than once all that time" are, if anything, part of the set of metaphors and concepts that Woolf's work deploys when implicitly or explicitly describing itself.

Precisely this complex self-description, characteristically paired with anxieties about her reputation, her originality, and her capacity to endure among the great works of English letters collided with the conceptual obstacles she thought to inhere in literary language on the 5th of May, 1927, the day on which *To the Lighthouse* was published. On that day Woolf sent Vita Sackville-West a dummy edition of her newly published work – a cover for *To the Lighthouse* enclosing a few hundred blank pages. She inscribed the gift with the following message, which she later worried anxiously might not be taken for the joke that it was intended to be: "in my opinion, the best novel that I have ever written."[75] Woolf's biographer Hermione Lee remarks in passing that the dummy book serves as a "tempting image," and while she herself expends little energy in thinking through the form and the meanings of this image, it is impossible to disagree. (For her part, Lee only cites the memoir 1960 memoir of

[75] Cited in Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. p. 478

François Mauriac, who explained that Woolf's novel of blank pages was "not the product of an author who had nothing more to say, but of one who had too much," and, cryptically, that "when I say too much, I mean in terms of quality rather than quality"[Lee 478][76]). We are now in a much better position to assess the image of the dummy book with exactness. In one sense, it both makes explicit and undermines Woolf's claim in "Modern Fiction" that now fiction will be open to infinite possibility; if we take her joke to Vita even slightly seriously, we see that her "best work" might also be her most extreme experiment, designed for no reader save one, which in its blank inertness expresses all of the intractable problems Woolf finds in the relation between life and literature. It forces abstraction to the limit of absolute purity; no longer can it be claimed that life is to be found on the pages of the dummy book, which renders it at the same time aesthetically invalid (though only arguably so, since Woolf's joke anticipates even the most demanding tests of the limits of art like readymades and blank canvases) and the most apt picture of the obstacles the modern novel must overcome. The joke characteristically reveals much about the joker; in this case, we have to recall that one of Woolf's favored metaphors for artistic creation is "transmutation," i.e., the alchemical process of transforming base metals into gold. The dummy copy of *To the Lighthouse* betrays every anxiety about the possibility of failed transmutation; it is inert matter as the remainder of failed experiment and

[76] Mauriac, François. *Mémoires Interieures*. Trans. G. Hopkins. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960. p. 101

effort. It is simultaneously the purest image of Woolf's anti-materialism and the apex of materialist literature, the empty, dead, and unreadable codex.

When we read *To the Lighthouse* and find its insistence on returning again and again to the image of the world void of subjectivity or experience, only most visibly in "Time Passes," it is tempting to see a melancholic reflection on human death and finitude. Woolf's characters often find themselves imagining the persistence of the world once they are no longer alive to experience it; Mrs. Ramsay hears in "the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach" the eventual "destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea" (20). Lily likewise feels at the sight of the dunes a sadness, "partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years … the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest" (24). Woolf's formally radical attempt to access in narrative these deaths and destructions that can be imagined (through something like Stephen's "hypothetical extension" of consciousness) but not genuinely experienced occurs in "Time Passes," when the house emptied of life is subject to "the insensibility of nature" (141) "(The long night seemed to have set in … the saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed," [141]); during a span in which "night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together" (138). In this shapeless temporal continuum, "loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted" (133).

The beauty of that empty form is remarkable because it achieves something – loveliness, stillness – that the formation of life in art. Of course this must be so

because the formation is really a transmutation, a change in nature. It's a situation with which Woolf's surrogate Lily is well acquainted: the passage from vision to canvas and the nearly heroic effort one must make to avoid admixture of whatever is alien and external to what one really sees. Lily "would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white" of the jacmanna flower she is painting early in the novel,

> "since she saw them like that … then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her … she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see," and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck away from her" (22-3).

No matter the strenuousness of the artistic effort to capture the purity of the vision as it is seen, Lily ultimately concludes, imagining that "jar on the nerves" that the "thing itself" makes before it has been made into art, that "the human apparatus for painting or for feeling" was "a miserable machine, an inefficient machine … it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on" (196). We are by now familiar with how Lily's struggle with paint on the blank canvas mirrors Woolf's own encounter with the form sentence waiting to be filled. And this gives us reason to

accord a different significance to the view from no one around which *To the Lighthouse* is constructed. The fascination that this eyeless sight holds for Woolf's narrator and her characters as much as for Woolf herself can be explained in numerous ways; it is certainly integral to the novel's thematic presentation of death and finitude, time and memory, and at the same time it draws on autobiographical elements of the text, such as the thought of Leslie Stephen and Woolf's interest in and acquaintance with the philosophical discussions circulating around Cambridge and Bloomsbury. What the present account wants to emphasize above all, though, is that "tempting image" of the dummy book that Virginia presented to Vita on the publication day of *To the Lighthouse*. Its emptiness, and Woolf's worrisome joke that it was her "best work," seem to be recognitions of the extreme point at which the heroic effort to mercilessly subtract one's self from what one sees and even *how* one sees it, to effect the absolute simultaneity of what is seen and what is made as a means of eradicating the alien and the external in avoidance of materialist falsity, terminates. It stands at once for the freedom of infinite artistic possibilities, the form of a sentence that can be filled in uncountable ways, and for the destruction wrought by literature on life. Above all, then, the view from no one belongs to the novel's ambivalent self-description in the moment of its historical and formal encounter with the artifice of materialism; it reflects on the inextricably linked possibilities and risks of the written work and supports a fantasy of the purification of form which it likewise recognizes in death. And, as such, it forms a kind of elegy – not for man, but for literature – expressed as

the latter's most extreme possibility if not also its highest achievement.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL AESTHETIC OF *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

Very early in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, Isa Oliver reads the following newspaper account of a gang rape perpetrated by English soldiers at Whitehall, in London: "The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face...."[77] "That was real," thinks Isa, but unusually this reality appears to denote neither accurate and objective description nor a somehow privileged status enjoyed by the rape among other kinds of apparently less real things and events. Isa's use of the word "real" depends not on factual verisimilitude and even less on sensible spatio-temporal existence, the sorts of mind-independent circumstances where the appropriateness of talk about reality would customarily seem to be at stake. Far from referring to something beyond the horizon of Isa's internal experience, the word "real" stands out because it is associated with the intensity of imagined vision that the report induces in her. Thus, at the same time that it emphasizes the "reality" of the attack, this passage defers exhaustively realistic description of it. Instead, it recounts the vividness of Isa's reaction to the article and

[77] Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1941. p. 20. Cited hereafter as *BA*.

the peculiar quality of feeling associated with bearing purely internal witness to the attack. It tells us that something is real, but to warrant that assertion, it shows us something private and personal. There is something counter-intuitive in this. The newspaper's report is "so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall" (*BA* 20); so real that, as in a daydream, Isa withdraws mentally from the room in which she sits and becomes momentarily blind to her immediate surroundings. The surface of a door becomes a private screen on which Isa experiences, visually, the scene of the rape as it had been described by *The Times*. As though she were viewing a film, Isa's imagined perspective narrows from an external view of the barracks, through the arches and into the barrack room, and finally to the bed where she *sees* the girl "screaming and hitting him," her attacker, "about the face." This private scene is cut abruptly short when Isa's husband's aunt, Mrs. Swithin, enters the room through the same door. At this point, when Mrs. Swithin's entrance destroys the illusory vision playing out on the door's surface and returns Isa to her immediate surroundings, the narrator finds it necessary to parenthetically remark that the door is, "in fact," a door. A noteworthy distinction is thereby drawn: between reality and fact, between the role played by the door in Isa's private reality and its wholly unremarkable, factual existence.

Why is the word "real" used to characterize the quality of an experience that is both private and imagined as distinct from what happens, factually, to be the case? This important question has been largely, if not exclusively, overlooked in the

considerable critical attention devoted to this passage. This is due, in large part, to a pair of substantial details which have until now sustained the interest of those critics who find Isa's reading of *The Times* and its narration worthy of extended comment. The first of these is brief but resonant. Mrs. Swithin enters the room carrying a hammer that she has borrowed from her brother, Isa's father-in-law Bartholomew Oliver, without asking. Here the narrative focus shifts from Isa to Mrs. Swithin and, in particular, to the relation between sister and brother, Swithin and Oliver. Mrs. Swithin has been nailing a placard on the barn in anticipation of the village pageant, to be held that evening on the grounds of Pointz Hall, the family residence. This she reminds her brother, "giving him a little pat on the shoulder," to calm his irritation at having his property disturbed. Thereupon the narrative focus returns to Isa and the attention she gives to the brief conversation that passes between Mrs. Swithin and Mr. Oliver. "The words," Mrs. Swithin's explanation to her brother that she had been nailing the placard on the Barn, "were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third" (21). Every year the same conversation takes place: Mrs. Swithin mentions the pageant, Mr. Oliver responds, "By Jupiter! I'd forgotten," and together they speculate about the weather, which will determine the location of the evening's activities (in the barn if it rains, on the terrace otherwise). Isa, presumably in something of a dark mood, hears the same words that she has heard "every summer, for seven summers now." But unlike the conversations of the six summers past, there is something distinct about the seventh:

"The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer'" (22).

Isa's imagined insertion of a hammer into the *Times* account of the rape has invited thorough critical attention. Christine Froula describes the appearance of the hammer as a fantasy that "embellishes the girl's resistance," such that "the Pointz Hall family becomes not just a microcosm of civilization's 'germ-cell' [as it might have been, Froula points out, for Freud] but a laboratory for small, everyday changes that may lead to greater ones."[78] Froula applauds Isa's political act; that she has placed the hammer in the raped girl's hands indicates how "the news story initiates [Isa's] private struggle toward speech and, by extension, calls women's desire and speech out from the crevices [...]." Isa thereby embodies, for Froula, "a sort of test case for the challenge of women's speech to civilization's masterplot" (Froula 296). In a similar vein, Gillian Beer, who argues that Woolf has placed "violence near the center of meaning" in *Between the Acts*, believes that "the mild old lady," Mrs. Swithin, "momentarily becomes a figure of female vengeance," since it was she who provided the source material – the hammer – for Isa's "fantasy enactment" of the rape.[79] Marina Mackay likewise describes Isa's "imaginative reconstruction of the past" as a

[78] Froula, Christine. *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity.* New York: Columbia UP, 2005. p. 296

[79] Beer, Gillian. "*Between the Acts*: Resisting the End," in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1996. pp.136-39.

"fantasy...of violent defense,"[80] and as a "violent appropriation" (Mackay 238) in the course of her more general argument that Woolf is the "foremost activist" for a mode of narration and social thought that "claims the possibility of reading the great through the small, of discerning public life from the private" (228). If "the hammer used to nail a placard for the pageant has become inseparable from its violent potential" (236), Isa's fantasy of violent of resistance is likewise inseparable from the general atmosphere of political violence; like Froula, Mackay identifies Isa's "fantasy" as a political act, even a necessary one, but one that regrettably departs from Woolf's earlier pacifist ideals. By articulating the possibility of resistance to the threats posed by war and fascism, Mackay argues, "*Between the Acts* acknowledges the necessary guilty compromise of its time: of, to borrow Cecil Day Lewis's contemporary formulation, defending the bad against the worse" (239). In this account, Isa's act is political because of its symbolic nature, because of the synecdochal relation that holds between an imaginary hammer and the presumably real form of resistance in the novel and beyond its boundaries.

Finally, while Karin Westman cites but does not devote sustained attention to Isa's imagined hammer, her remarks on the historical and ideological function of the newspaper in *Between the Acts*[81] share important thematic and methodological

[80] Mackay, Marina. "Putting the House in Order: Virginia Woolf and Blitz Modernism." *Modern Language Quarterly* 66.2 (Spring 2005). p. 236

[81] Westman, Karin. "'For her, the newspaper was a book:' Media, Mediation, and Oscillation in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.2 (2006) pp. 1-18.

assumptions with the preceding interpretations. For Westman, the newspaper both in the novel and in early 20th-century Britain offers "a direct link to current events even as it prescribes the reader's experience of those events" (Westman 2). In being "paradoxically transparent and opaque" the newspaper presents its readers an opportunity for critical reflection on social and political realities at the same time that it serves as a vehicle for ideological manipulation; thus, "in following the characters' reading experiences of the morning's *Times* we follow a central thematic concern in Woolf's novels, particularly this last one: the possibilities for resisting ideological interpellation and revising cultural scripts" (2). Westman describes Isa's relation to the rape in terms of immediacy: her reading is said to provoke "an immediate experience of the girl's encounter with the troopers," and, even more strongly, "Isa's reading makes the scene immediate, allowing the action to exist, realistically, in three-dimensional space" (8). Ultimately, Isa's reading practice (contrasted to, for example, Bart Oliver's) and the latter's effects, periodically visible throughout the novel, contribute to the "awareness" that she eventually gains "of her relationship to her world" (10). Westman thus finds in Isa a compelling model of resistance to the only apparently natural ideological order. Because she is "inattentive to the voice of *The Times*, Isa's attention is focused elsewhere: on the voice of the girl," (9). Because she attends to the real girl's cry while resisting the ideological context in virtue of which it is experienced, Isa occupies a position on the margins of ideological discourse to which readers of *Between the Acts* ought aspire. If both "a newspaper's and a novel's

seeming transparency can naturalize ideology," then Isa's example demonstrates how "Woolf arms her readers with the active critical reading skills she believes necessary" (2) for her contemporary political situation (a continent at war), and, presumably, our own.

But a second fact about this passage has been taken as crucial to its interpretation, in a manner that has lent considerable support to politically motivated readings of the abrupt reappearance of the hammer in Isa's mind. Unlike that mental episode, however, this fact is not to be found in the narration of the fictional world of the Oliver family; it is much more a part of Virginia Woolf's own historical circumstances, the "real world" of early summer, 1938. Then, Woolf was in the early stages of drafting *Pointz Hall*, the novel that would become *Between the Acts*. That June, *The Times* of London reported on the rape of a fourteen-year old girl and its consequences (indeed, the rape's legal ramifications were especially noteworthy, since the doctor Aleck Bourne was eventually acquitted of providing an illegal abortion for the victim); the article that Isa reads is not a purely fictional device, but an actual publication detailing an actual crime. For some critics, this fact is a meaningful one not only for historically informed readers of Woolf, but also for the narrative account of Isa's reading. It is the latter, after all, that calls attention to reality, now understood as the domain of historical fact distinct from fiction (including that of *Between the Acts* itself): "this news item about a rape of an English girl by English soldiers tears through the novel's illusion" (Froula 293).

In pursuing this argument, Froula posits a correlation between the historical rape and Isa's so-called toothache, the metaphorical affliction that had originally driven Isa to seek remedy in the written word ("as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one may contain a cure," Woolf writes, "[Isa] considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne" [*BA 19*]). The toothache accordingly connotes a state of private, individual suffering that can and should be viewed in the context of women's suffering more generally. Froula goes on to claim that "by incorporating the real gang rape into her novel, [Woolf] broaches the issue of civilization's violence against women in a way that tears not only fiction's veil but the boundary between (women's) private and (men's) public worlds; between Isa's private 'toothache' and the state military, legal, and medical institutions involved in the rape and its aftermath; between Isa's silent thoughts and the girl's public speech (…)" (Froula 294-5).

This deceptively simple claim is worth considering in some detail, since it exemplifies the dominant interpretation of this early, important passage from *Between the Acts*. For Froula, the appearance of the "real" (i.e., historically factual) *Times* article "tears fiction's veil;" this is a metaphor she twice employs to describe the relation between the article and the fictional setting in which it appears. The relation between the novel and historical fact is for Froula implicitly analogous to the relation, in this passage, between Isa's "toothache" and the rape itself, along with the atmosphere of institutional violence (against women especially) in which the latter takes place. In

Froula's structure of correspondences, in other words, the toothache occupies the same position as the novel itself. If these correspondences hold, it appears that the ways in which one may describe Isa's toothache can, on Froula's view, be legitimately extended to describe not only this particular novel but to the novel as a form. Froula provides no such descriptions herself; she only says that Woolf's text "broaches an issue" in such a way that blurs what might otherwise be taken as unquestionable boundaries, and she implies that this blurring occurs simultaneously in the two separate but analogous registers of form and content. There is warrant, therefore, to infer from her reading of Isa's toothache and its supposed relation to the newspaper article a more general picture of the way Froula's reading understands the relation between fiction and documentary fact. In the absence of this picture, the claim that the *Times* article "tears fiction's veil" remains difficult to assess.

After all, in Froula's consideration of virtually the whole of Woolf's authorship, this tearing of the veil forms part of a purely local argument. That is, the same metaphor is not used to describe just any historical fact appearing within the novel's frame; it would at least seem out of place to assign special significance in a likewise fashion to, for example, the article about the French prime minister Édouard Daladier that Mr. Oliver had read earlier in the morning ("'M. Daladier,' he read, finding his place in the column, "has been successful in pegging down the franc....' [*BA* 13]). Nor, indeed, does reference to entities like "England" or "newspaper," which requires for their intelligibility some minimum of linguistic competence and historical

understanding on the part of readers, tear the veil of fiction. To put all of this another way, Froula's claim does not pertain to narratological questions about mimesis or the techniques and theories of representing reality within a fictional milieu: it is not a claim about *realism* or verisimilitude. If historical fact trumps the means of its depiction, as Froula's argument suggests, then we are dealing not with representation but its transcendence in direct, concrete presentation. The novel thereby reveals its own unreal, illusory nature when it presents the rape as real and, just as important, subject to immediate apprehension as such. In this way, even Isa's first thought in response to the article, that "that was real," does not mark her own private reaction to the rape but instead signals the point at which the novel's artifice fails, in its explicit demonstration to the reader that *this* is not fictional. For Froula, this failure of artifice is not without explicitly political significance.

As a toothache is a species of suffering, the novel is a species of language. This is the apparent logic behind Froula's claim that the boundaries between world and fiction are made indistinct by Woolf's use of historical detail for political ends in this passage. The nature of the relation is to be understood in terms of the difference between the domain of literal, objective, public speech (belonging above all to the world outside the novel) and the domain of figurative, subjective, private speech (belonging above all to the novel). As Froula's reading of the toothache suggests, this relation is furthermore strictly analogous to that between society and the individual. The politically meaningful effect of this "blurring" of individuality and generality, we

have seen, is that "civilization's violence against women" is therein brought to light. How is this so? On the model of the toothache, the difference between individuality and generality is one of degree; a toothache typically causes suffering, but certainly not the kind of suffering associated with widespread and institutional violence against an entire class of citizens, the sort of condition subject to collective action directed at reform or revolt.

The *source* of political meaning is on the side of generality, then, because what is most general illuminates its particular instances precisely *as* instances: that is, it would never occur to us think of something like a toothache as anything but politically neutral *unless* we can show that it somehow finds its place within a far more general set of circumstances, the suffering of women. The toothache by itself is a kind of suffering, but it is not politically meaningful suffering. It could only be so if it is somehow referred to actual, literal, and decidedly political forms of pain, however these might be defined (e.g., suffering caused by the abuse of authority). Likewise, the corresponding relation between the novel and the historical actuality of the rape is established by the way a use of language with only limited reference to actual states of affairs is conferred political significance when it employs a form of language that is totally and transparently "real" with respect to actual states of affairs. The newspaper article tears the novel's illusion because it straightforwardly and literally *means* something beyond mere literary connotation, symbolism, or allusiveness: at the dawn of war, an English girl has been raped by English soldiers. As opposed to events

portrayed within the frame of the narrative (Isa's search for reading material, her peculiar third-person perspective on the events therein recounted, the newspaper itself as a symbol of transformation in media and technology, and so forth), this extra-literary fact stands for nothing outside itself, and requires nothing else to bear political significance. On this reading, the newspaper is a cure not only for Isa's "toothache," but for *Between the Acts* itself: for its own intrinsic political indifference or ineffectiveness.

I have elaborated Froula's interpretation at length because it provides a sophisticated version of a picture of *Between the Acts* that, I will argue, ought to be revised. But I will also suggest that it ultimately implies a position that Froula herself would likely not endorse. In this it is instructive for understanding the reception not only of this critical passage, but of the status of the political in Woolf's work in general. Building on her brief analysis of Isa, the article, and the toothache, Froula analyzes one the central objects of the narrative – the outdoor pageant, presented along with its seemingly constant interruptions by spectators and the natural world alike – according to the same picture of the "real world" supervening upon the artifice of fiction. Her understanding of this dynamic in *Between the Acts* hinges on the idea that "in keeping with the dissolving boundaries between the work of art and the world according to Woolf's 'philosophy,' between the real rape and the novel's fictional world, between nature and the pageant, the narrator writes the 'real' spectators and the 'real' world into the picture. The pageant provides an occasion and a temporal frame

to hang the human voices on, a canvas for the narrator's documentary art." Froula wants to see Woolf as committed to an understanding of the relation between art and reality such that, ultimately, "*Between the Acts* dissolves any notion of a divide between functional and poetic language" (Froula 305).

This is a strong and provocative claim. At this stage, however, it is important just to indicate that, if my analysis of Froula's interpretation is correct, then it is demonstrable that she cannot simultaneously commit herself to this claim that *Between the Acts* dissolves the distinction between functional and poetical language *and* a notion that "reality" is the ultimate source of political significance. This latter assumption is by no means unjustified, and it plays a substantial role in Froula's reading: "The news story shakes its fist at Isa's paralysis, at fiction's evasions of half-civilized barbarism, with a vehemence neither 'fantastic' nor 'romantic' but real," such that "the girl's real screams not only foil Isa's silence but hail her to speech" (296). Isa can be a model for our own reading of *Between the Acts* if, as Froula later suggests in her reading of its conclusion, "Woolf's last ending beckons us over the edge of the page toward opportunities that history's violence continually interrupts but can never foreclose" (318-9). In Froula's picture of the relation between the "real world" and the artwork, reality supervenes upon an artistic milieu that is self-enclosed (just like Isa, locked in privacy and individuality until hailed by a scream that is more real than she can know) and, in itself, apolitical. But this picture and Froula's claim about functional and poetic language cannot both be true. It looks more accurate to claim, on Froula's reading,

that poetic language can and does possess political meaning, but it would not do so if it were not referred to a prevailing set of real conditions or circumstances, that is, if it were not already functional. One cannot even call the newspaper article "real," if by this one means to indicate its factual existence outside the novel, *without* a distinction between functional and poetic language. It appears closer to Froula's actual interpretive practice to suppose that, insofar as purportedly poetic language succeeds in referring beyond its own self-erected boundaries, it *becomes* functional. But this is a much different claim than Froula's because it fully preserves the distinction between poetic and functional language as the distinction between words that refer to specific real things and those that do not, or at least those that are meaningful in ways beyond direct reference. If, furthermore, we take seriously the privilege that Froula confers to the newspaper article, then we cannot even say that poetic language becomes functional by itself, because it does so only by being brought into relation with its outside, by being located as an individual instance of a more global meaning. This entails not that the distinction between poetic and functional has been dissolved, just that the poetic has been submitted to the norm of the functional.

Froula's remarks on the relation between the real world and the artwork (which is, for her, internally figured by the relation between Isa and the newspaper article) in *Between the Acts* do not exhaust her valuable analysis of that work, nor indeed of Woolf's entire authorship, but her views represent a serious and sophisticated analysis of the political meaning of "reality" in Woolf. The examination of her argument has

been undertaken in order to complete our picture of the dominant understanding of this early passage from *Between the Acts*, in accordance with the notion that completing this picture allows me to show what it has left out or passed over too quickly. If the peculiar distinction, observed above, between "fact" and "reality" drawn by this passage's narrator has not been commented upon in detail, that is because prevailing interpretations, under the sway of two powerful details (Isa's imagined hammer and the historical actuality of the newspaper article), have been eager to emphasize the inherently political character of Isa's reading of the newspaper. The conclusions that these readings propose are useful in more than one respect; among other things, they underscore the kinds of issues at stake for understanding the apparent paradox this work of literature is simultaneously social *and* self-enclosed. By focusing on the way in which the newspaper article affects Isa's thinking about the world, the interpretations thus far examined present *in nuce* a picture of the formation or action of political subjectivity, that is, a description of how it comes to pass that real circumstances impinge on a person (in this case, Isa Oliver) in a way that determines his or her political motives for political belief or action. On these grounds, for example, we have seen Mackay describing Isa's reaction as a "fantasy of violent defense," and Froula focusing on the dynamic between private and public life at stake in Isa's newfound desire for public – i.e., political – speech. For these interpretations it is often the case, whether implicitly or explicitly, that this model of political subjectivity obtains not just within Woolf's fiction but, more generally, within our own social reality. There is

accordingly a strongly prescriptive element to this interpretation. The latter implies not that Isa's reaction is typical or normal, that Woolf describes just how *anyone* would react, even granted Isa's individuality and unique circumstances; this would make the political value of Isa's reaction more difficult to discern, because it would be a necessary result of reading rather than a contingent act of decision or resistance. There is political value in Isa's reaction because something in it tells us what the reaction of anyone in Isa's place *ought* to be; her reaction is noteworthy to the extent that it depicts a favorable change in Isa's relation to the social world. Newly oriented away from the confines of her own private life toward very real public issues, Isa models the experience of the reader of *Between the Acts,* who finds her private experience of the novel disrupted by the intrusion of real social circumstances that the narrative cannot contain.

In what follows, I will argue for a reading of this passage that connects it with a central theme of *Between the Acts,* which is the problem of relating meaningful form with the formless, the shapeless, the fleeting, or the dispersed – a problem which has an obviously political aspect. Indeed, Jed Esty has read *Between the Acts* as exploring, "with a sometimes burdensome degree of self-consciousness … the growing historical tension between the universal subject of modernism (psyche/myth) and the demands of a *particularized* collective, defined, in this case, by nationhood."[82] For Esty, the

[82] Esty, Jed. *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003. p. 105

pageantplay of Woolf's novel dramatizes the relationship between artist in audience, confirming Froula's claim about the real source of meaning: Woolf's vision is of "a spontaneous community which *is in itself* meaning and which therefore renders obsolete the modernist artist's gift of form" (Esty 106). My reading of the relationship between form and meaning in *Between the Acts,* on the other hand, will depart from these explicitly political and historicist interpretations in its treatment of the novel's political meaning as a central but subsidiary aspect of the novel's more general engagement with the status and the function of narrative form. This will lead me to three general conclusions. First, while the longstanding critical desideratum of redeeming Woolf's cultural politics has essentially succeeded, the continued dominance of this project has obscured the possibility of understanding the ways in which *Between the Acts* (and, by implication, Woolf's fiction in general) does not submit narrativity to extraliterary ends; second, departing from this framework doesn't forbid articulating a different way of thinking about the political in Woolf, now understood as dependent on the more general category of narrative form; finally, in the passage that we have and will continue thinking about, the question of political meaning makes itself felt in two related ways – first, in the problem of drawing a distinction between *action* and merely physical event or cause, and subsequently, in the formal delineation of the domain of politics from that of the ethical or the merely subjectively felt.

I have characterized the ambition to provide new politicizations of Woolf's fiction as dominant, but these interpretations are dominant for a reason: they grow out of a longstanding debate about Woolf's own politics in particular and the cultural politics of modernism more generally. Is Woolf's fiction an ideological *apologia* to bourgeois sensibility? Or does she embrace a social commitment as part of an artistic *avant garde*? Indeed, it is not necessary to rehearse the history of Woolf's early critical reception in too much detail in order to establish the uniquely influential influence of the image of Woolf as "an immured priestess in the temple of art – dedicated, solitary, out of touch with her time."[83] This image (of the Bloomsbury aesthete, the chronicler of the bourgeois psyche, the writer whose social concerns never extend far beyond the manners and conventions of the elite, and so forth) made Woolf an object of scorn on the political Right and Left during her lifetime. She is "quite insulated by class," as Queenie Leavis's notorious 1938 *Scrutiny* review of *Three Guineas* puts it, to to the extent that she is "not living in the contemporary world." In a conservative version of the same objection, Wyndham Lewis (in *Men Without Art*) sees Woolf engaged in "feminizing" culture, by virtue of her implicit refusal of the sober and ostensibly male values of objectivity, materiality, and reality. The charge of aestheticism persists in roughly the same form in those critics like Raymond Williams or Elaine Showalter who see in Woolf' fiction a reproduction of pernicious social

[83] Zwerdling, Alex. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1986. p. 9

ideologies and a concomitant failure of artistic commitment. But the real influence of this portrait of Woolf's intrinsic conservatism or aestheticism is to be found in the fact that hardly anyone can be found defending it today; its rejection by the now orthodox politically affirmative reading of Woolf, beginning with critics like Toril Moi and Jane Marcus, was swift and severe. The summary of the historical and critical development of this affirmative reading provided by Alex Zwerdling is thereby instructive on several counts:

> "only in very recent commentary on Woolf's work has this sense of her as an original and important social observer emerged. The earlier view that she fostered what one critic called 'the development of a cult of sensibility, inadequately based on the realities of the social situation' has been long adying. The impetus for change has come from the contemporary women's movement, and particular from its rereading of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas.* A closer scrutiny of these works than the Leavises and their disciples had given them reveal that Woolf was very much in touch with the historical forces of her time..." (Zwerdling 31-2).

It is, on one level, telling that Zwerdling mentions Woolf's non-fictional writings *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* as central impetuses for those undertaking a reevaluation of Woolf's *fiction.* Of course, it is difficult to see how the author of those writings could be anything *but* politically committed (and, furthermore, politically committed in distinctly appealing ways for the majority of contemporary literary

critics). On the other hand, the practice of establishing a political account of Woolf's fiction on the basis of her non-fictional writing (whether in the aforementioned publications, the diaries, or the essays) is questionable. The interpretation that I am offering proceeds according to the idea that it is desirable to avoid an explanation of Woolf's literary practice that subordinates the latter either to exclusively political (or philosophical, social, religious) concerns, if only because explanations of that sort run the considerable risk of treating fiction as little more than mere means for some extra-literary end. The approach developed here should be seen as situated within this interpretive context; my aim, however, is certainly not to restore credibility to the image of Woolf the aestheticist in order to decide whether she is thereby worthy of praise or blame. The notion that Woolf's fiction has worldly ambitions, whether political or philosophical, is to be taken seriously. The argument pursued here, however, will suggest that such ambitions can't be fully assessed if they are not understood as part of the more general question about narrative form. If this interpretation is plausible, finally, it will entail that we no longer need to adhere to a framework that sees Woolf's fiction as either embodying the aestheticist retreat from reality or providing an ultimately ornamental conveyance for more fundamental political truths.

I will begin to establish this approach by recalling that the problem of relating an individual, local event (the rape at Whitehall) to a more general set of socio-historical circumstances that, viewed properly, ought to be otherwise (the subjugation

of women) has been explicitly foregrounded in what I have outlined as political interpretions of the rape's appearance within the frame of the narrative. In fact, the possibility of meaningfully establishing this relation between particularity and generality is an essential condition of the political reading. On these grounds, Rebecca Walkowitz is certainly correct to argue that a central preoccupation of Woolf's fiction, including *Between the Acts,* is to ask "how [one displays] systemic conditions without seeming to ignore the particularity of events or diminish their singular importance."[84] But it cannot just be a question of "ignoring" the particular, because one can only ignore a particular instance of a general circumstance when the existence of a plausible and meaningful relation between the two is no longer in question. Otherwise, the particular wouldn't be particular, since particularity is defined by its relation to generality. At the most abstract level, this relation is implied in any use of concepts; we understand a particular sheep *as* a sheep because we can competently employ the general concept that picks out the class of animals called sheep. In the domain of history and politics, however, this relation is rather more tenuous; it may well be the case that we possess no general framework in which to understand some local event as anything beyond itself. What is it that makes the rape at Whitehall meaningful beyond its brute, factual occurrence? Certainly we comprehend it as more or less immediately enmeshed in a network of legal and moral significations, but to see it as

[84] Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. p. 83

instantiating a less concrete form of generality – the "systematic conditions" to which Walkowitz refers – requires further elaboration. This elaboration, I argue, ought also to be understood as narration. One main point of the political interpretation is that the fiction of *Between the Acts* performs this function of mediating between the rape as *this* specific crime and the network (perhaps even the cultural logic) that it can be seen to exemplify. There is no reason to disagree with this, as long as we understand this mediation as an aspect of the more general function of narrative, the basic formal operation of which is to synthesize discrete elements into a meaningful shape.

Consider another of the novel's thematic concerns: the social effects of technological modernity. When the narrator of *Between the Acts* tells us that, for Isa's generation "the newspaper [is] a book" (*BA* 20), the point of the metaphorical transformation of books into newspapers is to epitomize the relation between an entire generation – those who, like Isa, shared "the age of the century," and who wondered pointedly "what remedy was there for her at her age … in books" (19) – and its technological and informational milieu. How to capture the effects of modernization is a recurring, if not dominant, concern in the novel, set in a rural village in "very heart of England" (17) that becomes emblematic of historical tensions within England itself. Thus "there were absentees when Mr. Streatfield," the venerable clergyman whose very name indicates something of his position, and perhaps that of the institutions he could be said to represent, at a boundary between tradition and advancing technological change, "called his roll call in the church. The

motor bike, the motor bus, and the movies – when Mr. Streatfield called his roll call, he laid the blame on them" (75). Again, a minimal metonymic substitution (Mr. Streatfield blames the motor bike or the movie, when in fact these modern distractions are the merely the means for those of his flock, truly culpable, who decide to forsake their Sunday ritual for considerably more earthly purposes) forms part of an implicit description of how social and individual life has been affected by technological change.

That the problem of narration will itself be an object of narration is announced early in the novel. The narrator's first extended characterization of Isa finds her in her chamber, on the morning of the pageant, reflecting on an illicit extramarital desire for "the romantic gentleman farmer," Mr. Haines (14). Isa's inclinations are deeply poetic; throughout the novel, she is found talking to herself in verse, composing fragments of poetry that she keeps hidden from public scrutiny (a fact that superficially reinforces the view according to which the poetic is analogous to the private). Here, realizing her "love" for Haines with an admixture of excitement, resignation, and anxiety, she struggles to find the right way to express in her poetic language the feeling that Haines has provoked in her even in their brief and inconsequential encounters, the secret feeling of charged awareness when one's beloved is in the room:

> "In love," she must be, since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie

> between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating – she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away... (14-5).

In one respect, Isa is engaged in the most basic literary project of finding a fitting metaphor, if by this we mean that she expresses something literal (if the phrase "in love" is indeed literal), however indistinct it may be, in a non-literal fashion. But it is furthermore the case that in this passage, what gets figured – the exceptional feeling that Isa feels in conversation with Haines, the peculiar way in which his words or his presence attach themselves to her, secretly bonding her to him, in short the affective or libidinal charge that she associates with him –is narrated as a series of mental acts groping towards meaning. It's also noteworthy that this meaning can't preexist in a straightforward manner the means of its figuration; consequently, the notion that her interior state is just the literal, meaningful in-itself material for an ornamental or supplementary act of narration or figuration is called into question. The feeling that she wants to name couldn't have been experienced in precisely the same way without the memory of watching an airplane take off at Croydon, and, a fortiori, without the knowledge that such things as airplanes exist. That technological modernization should be reflected in even in a fleeting, private reflection on love is a striking fact; more fundamentally, though, we see through Isa's example how the notion of

meaningful form articulates different themes at once – Isa's emotional state, technology, poetic creation, and so forth. To stay with the example of technological modernization, this articulation is accomplished through the narrative production of relations between individual instances or events (the declining attendance at church, the status of books, or the feeling of love) that epitomize, exemplify, and, in some respects, constitute the more general circumstance of modernity. This description is not aimed simply at stating the obvious – that Isa's (and Woolf's) generation was witness to sweeping technological change – but, in filling in that fact's significance even at the most seemingly banal level, it aims to show something about how meaning is given to disparate and even insignificant facts. Viewed in this way, we see how this description is, for the novel, a formal problem: how is the chaos of life, thought, world, and language to be given meaningful form?

We can start see how the novel itself construes this question about narrative and meaning in Isa's search for the right metaphor to describe her feelings for Haines, because there it is not only a question of finding adequate expression for an interior state, but a narrative about how we give sense to things through memory or how the world forces its alien vocabulary – "whizz" and "buzz" – upon us. As Isa herself realizes, however, there is always the possibility (and perhaps even the likelihood) that her act of figuration might fail to achieve genuine significance. Isa draws the distinction between two loves, between the love "in her eyes" (for Haines) and that "other love," signified the ordinary objects of everyday life that surround her, "for her

husband, the stockbroker – 'The father of my children,' she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction" (14). What is the difference between effective forms of narration, which illuminates the significance of the airplane propeller and its nameless buzz, and the empty uselessness of cliché? One might be tempted to think of cliché as essentially mechanical or repetitive in character, and thus unsuitable for Isa's need to achieve authentic, lifelike, self-expression. At first glance, such a superficial reading cannot be sustained: after all, Isa's first thought, as she tries to name the feeling Haines provokes in her, is of a machine and the seemingly infinite quickness of repetition that it evokes. There can at least be no simple opposition between the empty mechanism of cliché and some other figure that eludes banal convention through hypothetically absolute novelty. Cliché is, nevertheless, a kind of aesthetic failure in this scene. Isa self-consciously, perhaps ironically, indulges in a cliché about her marriage, but only insofar as the cliché states a mere fact: Giles Oliver, her husband, is indeed the father of her children. There is more said about this relationship by "the silver boxes and tooth-brushes" on her washstand than by the cliché, "the father of my children," just as there is more said about Isa's love for Haines by the exhilarating spin of an airplane's propeller than by the words "in love," even if that is indeed what "she must be" (14).

This passage demonstrates that the failure represented by cliché results neither from a purportedly mechanical, repetitive character nor from factual untruth. But the question still stands: in what way does cliché essentially differ from the successful

figuration provided by the airplane propeller? This specific difference is more difficult to identify than one might initially surmise. There is indeed an opposition between cliché and the more meaningful propeller metaphor which, at first glance, seems simply to mirror the distinction between Isa's love (by convention) for her husband Giles and the novel excitement she feels in the presence of Haines. But the simple association of cliché with convention makes this distinction harder to maintain, if only for the simple reason that the propeller metaphor, even if it is a novel way of expressing Isa's feeling, participates in conventional talk about feelings in order to be recognizable as a successful figuration. That is, if it can't be seen as part of a distinctive literary tradition, it would in no way distinguish itself as a literary use of language. In more straightforward dimension, however, one cannot help but notice that this entire scene is in many respects deeply conventional, and the cliché might extend beyond Isa's admittedly ironic use of the phrase "the father of my children" to encompass the basic constituents of the passage: a wealthy woman standing before a mirror and combing her hair, using a "heavy embossed silver brush that had been a wedding present" (13) that radiates a powerful sense of domesticity and familial obligation, reflecting on a "love" that consists of little more than a handful of exchanged words and glances.

The figure is nevertheless a successful one, even if the boundary between cliché and meaningful figure (and thus the source of meaning in the interaction between narrative form and that which gives shape) is difficult to place, even if Isa can't

ultimately find “a word to fit” the latter's vibrations: “whizzed, whirred, buzzed” looks like a list of candidates, but before she can settle on any choice, the plane in her memory of that morning Croydon takes off; she can only watch it disappear. A cliché is something made banal or trivial by overuse, convention, or tradition; like the printing technique from which it etymologically originates, the cliché operates as an original for myriad copies, a model reproduced identically and endlessly, each time with diminished effect. Isa's suggested replacement, on the other hand, shows something else at work. As we have seen, the movement of the propeller is an image of the affects associated with falling “in love,” but, even more, it is a figure of something passing on before it can be appropriately named. This is true not only in the semantic register (especially since “love” seems rather strong as a description of Isa's feelings), but in the lived experience of love, and its ephemeral instantiation in the world: her love will die, either at some unanticipated moment during her lifetime or at its end. The airplane soars away, leaving Isa to mentally compose a couplet where the semantic ambivalence of the first person plural, “we,” serves to implicitly connect flight to life itself: “'where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,' she hummed. 'Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent...” (15). (At this point Isa's thought's trail off; the narrative continues with the statement that “the rhyme was 'air,' as Isa picks up the telephone to place an order for lunch the afternoon's lunch). Combined with the distinction drawn between meaningful narration and cliché in the passage, Isa's poetic utterance suggests that

love or its associated affects cannot be accurately described in terms of a precise and concretely delimited original that gets repeated every time it appears in language. Isa's feeling isn't located in some place where language fails to penetrate, in some hypothetically ineffable core of her being, where it would be immediately felt but not given to meaningful expression. Rather, the literary language she uses is perfectly adequate to the impermanent and decidedly human nature of that which she is attempting to name.

The whizz and buzz of Isa's remembered airplane is explicitly mirrored in a peculiar fashion at the end of the novel, once the pageant-play has ended and as the audience disperses. As the play's director (and overbearing figure of the artist) Miss La Trobe laments the evening's variety of difficulties that, at least in her mind, destroyed the artistic integrity of her creation, her thoughts of failure are interrupted by a flock of starlings landing on a nearby tree (and this almost immediately after another narration of Isa's fraught feelings with respect to married life, as she takes angry note of her husband Giles walking alongside the overly affectionate Mrs. Manresa, muttering once again the cliché, "the father of my children," this time more like a curse [207]):

> "Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, birdblackened tree. The tree became a

> rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off!" (209).

At first glance, it seems straightforward enough to claim that the kind of figurative description which we have been attempting to isolate from cliché is thus characterized by its ability to poetically evoke life in a more authentic fashion than cliché can manage. But, as we've seen in the case of Isa's use of the propeller metaphor, the relation between a figure and what it figures should not, like cliché, be understood on the model of an original and its copies. The image of the flock of birds mingling chaotically in the tree, whose senseless calls stand in for the overwhelming noise of life itself, illuminates Isa's poetic description of love, because the figure here (the tree overfull with noisy birds as metonymy for life and all living things) also, in a peculiar way, figures how a figure should work when it is not a cliché, because it narrates the way in which the indistinct, the chaotic, the cacophonous are discordantly concordant in narration: its chaotically portrays how all the chaotically distinct fragments of living are paradoxically united in the narration of life. But neither love nor life can be comprehended by a single model, because they can be said to exist only in their instances: in the feeling of our beloved nearby, in a tree black with screeching, living things. In that respect, we can see why talk about "love" or "life" is, from the point of view of the narrative, a problem of how narration both gives and takes meaning from what it narrates. In either case, the problem is to create something general – "love,"

"life," – from the standpoint of just *this* instance and no other. The instance illuminates the generality with which it is thrown into relation just as much as the generality illuminates its instances: as Isa's thoughts about love lead her to poetically evoke its inability to persist or endure as "we" rush, as if in flight, through our lives, the birds evoke the senselessness and chaos of life, even human life. As when swallows had earlier on seemed to the narrator to "make a pattern," as they were "dancing, like the Russians, only not to music, but to the unheard rhythm of their own wild hearts" (65), narration imposes form or pattern, and thus sense, on something intrinsically patternless. But there is also a way in which the patternless (a flock of birds) or the repetitive (the propeller's buzzing rotation) by themselves suggest the sorts of meanings that narration can give them. What the novel leaves us with, I want to suggest, is a certain ambiguity about the exact point where meaning lies in the narrative shaping of its shapeless elements. There is certainly a distinction between significant form and the matter of plot and character or event and action that are made meaningful by narrative acts of ordering, presenting, and figuring. Exactly where to draw this line, though, is left open. And if this insight is overlooked, the political character of Isa's reading practice might not be as clear a rectification of the novel's aesthetic labor as Froula and others have suggested.

How might the passage with which we began be understood within my argument about the status of narrative form? It should be noted that it is difficult to deny what the political interpretations surveyed above no doubt implicitly claim: that

without attention to the explicitly political content of the scene in question, this passage cannot be understood. One might argue that the girl's rape is an immediately political fact. That was certainly the case, historically; in the novel, however, the immediacy of the political character of Isa's *reaction* to the newspaper description is complicated by its narrative framing. Unusually, what Woolf's narrator foregrounds is the act of reading. The narrator shows Isa reading word for word; indeed, the narration of this event takes longer than the event itself in narrative time, as the narrator gauges Isa's reaction, and her continual revision of the latter, as she reads. Finding that no book can stop her toothache – which, given our detailed examination of Isa's earlier reflections on Haines, we can now better understand as the feeling of raging distraction from daily life, the mental impediment to carrying on as normal, according to convention – she turns to the newspaper dropped by her father-in-law Bart: "she took it and read: 'A horse with a green tail...' which was fantastic. Next, 'The guard at Whitehall...' which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: 'The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room...'" (20). The reality that Isa identifies with her abrupt "that was real" is not reality outside Isa's mind, outside Pointz Hall, or outside the novel; we see here that Isa's use of this word does not stand alone, but forms a triad along with "fantasy" and "romance."

Before Isa's reading can be understood in immediately political terms, especially if that understanding is guided by the idea that a reality beyond the novel is the source

of political meaning, this contrast between reality, fantasy, and romance – that is, the Isa's use of "reality" as an essentially *generic* qualifier, must be taken into account. Fantasy and romance, we might say, belong among the clichés provided by fiction: the uniformed solider or the colored horse easily evoke conventions of genre without by themselves meaning anything in particular. But that doesn't mean that "reality" here corresponds to non-fiction. "Reality" is what plunges Isa into a distinctly *unreal* vision, a vision explicitly contrasted with the meaningless, factual existence of the door upon which she mentally projects the terrible scene of rape. The distinction between reality and fact in this passage, like the distinction between cliché and meaningful narration, cannot be made to correspond to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction or between truth and falsity. Accordingly, there is no relevant distinction to be made between the historical actuality of the newspaper article and the fictional artifice of its narrative framing: from the standpoint of the novel, there is nothing but fictional narrative. The first question this passage asks is: what does it feel like to read something so strikingly *real* that you forget you are reading anything at all? How can this encounter erase the very act of "building word upon word," in order to see a jumbled collection of sounds and images as something coherent and significant in itself?

Such questions are the necessary but not sufficient conditions of the affirmative reading of Woolf's politics. In order to read this passage prescriptively, most commentators have wanted to make Isa in some way or other the model of political

subjectivity – that is, they see in Isa a way of thinking or acting that one ought in some if not all respects emulate. Indeed, they rely on the idea that when the phrase "she screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer" passes through Isa's mind, the insertion of the hammer is an *action* in a robust sense: recall that it is described as part of a "private struggle" (Froula), as "fantasy of violent defense" (Mackay), or emblematic of "active critical reading skills" (Westman). But what evidence does the passage give us to think that the hammer's reappearance in Isa's thoughts, "beneath the chime" (22) of the monotonously repeated conversation between Mrs. Swithin and Mr. Oliver, is the result of a consciously willed decision on Isa's part? If it is true that she metaphorically "hears" a sort of inner voice, it seems at least consistent to suggest that Isa passively receives the lingering image of the girl along with the hammer that interrupted her reading. After all, the "realism" of the passage is what impinged upon her so strongly, forcing her to distraction. This reading of Isa's reaction is, I think, consistent with a view that sees in Woolf's fiction more generally the attempt to capture in literary language the fleeting moments of subjective life, the various "atoms" at all times passing through consciousness. As Jonathan Kramnick has recently remarked, an "important property of actions" is that they "extend the mind into the world"[85]; here, though, the reverse could be said to take place: the

[85] Kramnick, Jonathan. *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson.* Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2010. p. 3.

world (at least, the words of the newspaper and the hammer wielded by Mrs. Swithin) gives new shape to Isa's interior life.

In light of the reading of the problem of narrative form that I've provided here, however, I think it is justified to propose a third option – one that would not rely on deciding with certainty whether Isa's reaction is active or passive, a willed choice or a merely subjective event. This is because the very distinction between action and mere event requires narration: attributing to Isa an action means giving a coherent and meaningful shape to the various elements of Isa's mental life, telling a story about how a motive was expressed in a decisive action, and so on. It is consistent with my analysis, though, to suggest that the passage in question leaves ambiguous the exact distinction between action and a physical event like affect. This, of course, re-orients the sorts of political motivations we can attribute to Isa or (and, by extension, to Woolf), but it doesn't mean that all political questions are thereby foreclosed. Indeed, I suggest that the passage poses an implicit question: what *is* the difference between meaningful action and unwilled reaction, behavior, convention, habit, or fantasy? One way of answering this question, *Between the Acts* shows, is through narrative. Isa's dawning political consciousness is neither purely active nor purely passive, and the aesthetic formation of her mind in relation to her world is necessary to understanding this relation as such. This formation likewise asks us to consider the specific difference of the political domain as it is constructed in *Between the Acts*: the sort of meaningful action it implies and investments it reveals, as distinct from ethical, moral,

or religious thought as it is from revulsion, despair, or outrage. This question gets worked out as part of reflection on forms of narration, not on a terrain dictated by *a priori* decisions about the political ambitions of Woolf's art – but its possible answers might be at least as radical as those readings proposed by Woolf's politically engaged admirers. This is especially the case if the politics of literature can only be the politics of literature's self-destruction: "rending the veil" of fiction may indeed have as its effect the laying bare of history, but at the same time it risks eradicating the novel's image of the intricately mediated relation between politics and modern subject. In this it makes Isa a sheer device, a means of reporting the news, no different from the newspaper that provokes in her the thought of political reality.

CHAPTER 4

JOYCE'S "ITHACA." THE MATTER OF NOTHINGNESS

Up to this point, my argument has focused its attention almost exclusively on the fiction of Virginia Woolf in an effort to demonstrate and explain the complex literary and aesthetic significance of materialism in the modernist novel. Over the course of this demonstration, we have seen the transformation of materialism from being either a philosophical doctrine or a scientific stance into a uniquely literary and aesthetic problem, at once an obstacle to and an opportunity for the expression of modernism in the novel. Clearly, though, if I have appealed to such general (and perhaps vague) categories as "the modernist novel," then my ambition must in part be to warrant its broader explanatory applicability. Woolf's novels have been exemplary because she makes the refutation of novelistic materialism the explicit aim of any fictional enterprise that wishes to entitle itself to the claim of being "modern." Over the course of the last two chapters, however, my argument has systematically undermined any simplistic interpretation of Woolf's correlation of modernity and the non- or anti-materialist novel which makes the full expression "life" its unique subject matter: the "thing itself before it has been made anything," as Lily Briscoe memorably and paradoxically describes the object of her artistic ambition. In the broad terms, this approach unfolded in three stages: first, it showed how the language of materialism enters Woolf's vocabulary via an acquaintance with a philosophical concern to

develop a theory of knowledge in the face of rapid scientific discovery and technological innovation, especially in the writings of her father Leslie Stephen and in the intellectual scene associated with Cambridge and Bloomsbury. I argued, though, that Woolf's deployment of the idea of materialism is poorly understood if the latter is assumed to constitute just one theme among others that appears in Woolf's work; rather, I showed how Woolf's conception of literary and aesthetic *form* is deeply though ambiguously tied to the deadness of materiality that is only really recognized by a view from no one – a kind of vision emptied of sense, memory, and subjectivity.

In one respect, then, the interpretation of Woolf's fiction carried out over the last two chapters reached conclusions that pertain specifically to *Between the Acts* and *To the Lighthouse*. That interpretation certainly endorses, but leaves implicit, the claim that its understanding of materialism vis-à-vis form, theme, and image would be amplified by incorporating a great many examples of Woolf's long and short fiction, including the major works *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*. This is, of course, natural and to be expected – all such readings inevitably produce insights that pertain uniquely to single authors or even to single representative works, even if they operate with general assumptions about, say, the historical, conceptual, and textual relations between novels and their intellectual and cultural milieus. But in this chapter my argument will take a further step by extending its analysis to a far more complicated object: James Joyce's 1922 *Ulysses*, perhaps the most emblematic instance of radical modernist experiment with the novel form (which experiment provides, at the same time, a

recapitulation of traditional European letters: Wyndham Lewis noted early in the history of its inception that *Ulysses* was "an encylopaedia of English literary technique, as well as a general-knowledge paper,"[86] and Karen Lawrence has described in detail the work's "odyssey of style"[87]). In this chapter, which will focus on the novel's penultimate 17th episode, "Ithaca," I will pursue the same line of inquiry with respect to Joyce as I have with Woolf. That is, my reading of "Ithaca" will lend further support to one of the general claims of the dissertation as a whole – that is, that the modernist novel's efforts at a figuration of materiality (a) must be understood, in a sense contrary to intuitions about the meaning of "materialism," to be most emphatic in conjunction with the imagination of a "view from no one" that tends towards the annihilation of both subjectivity and physical existence and (b) that this figuration is most visible in moments where the novel can be seen reflecting on its own formal, material/technical, and historical limits. One consequence of this approach, which has been fleshed out over the course of the dissertation and which will be made explicit as one of its main conclusions, is that the whole category of "materiality" is both alluring and provocative for artistic and especially literary modes involved in intricate forms of self-description. It offers useful – perhaps essential – ways of arriving at a formal understanding of modernism in general, which might see this self-description as relying, in increasingly explicit ways, on the artistic presentation of materiality and the

[86] Lewis, Wyndham. *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993. p. 74
[87] Lawrence, Karen. *The Odyssey of Style in* Ulysses. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981.

processes of its transformation, as in Clement Greenberg's account of pictorial modernism. But to the extent that this is so, the idea of a literary or aesthetic materialism clearly undermines itself: or, what amounts to the same thing, it accesses *not* an extra-aesthetic reality or materiality or history to which the work is granted privileged contact or community, but instead enshrines what may be thought of as the aesthetic as such.

Writing about Joyce, and *a fortiori* about his most important and most studied work, presents unique difficulties that ought not be passed over without some comment, even if the latter effectively only rehearses the critical anxieties of most Joyce scholars who find themselves confronted by an ever-proliferating body of scholarly literature on the text and the history of *Ulysses*. It has been sixty years at least since the unprecedented accumulation of Joyce criticism has itself become a meta-theme of Joyce criticism; it's now not only a truism but an outright cliché to refer to the (still alive and well) Joyce "industry," or to remark that only Shakespeare has garnered more citations in the secondary literature. This leads to a peculiar critical situation; as Joseph Brooker remarks with respect to the genre of meta-criticism that has emerged around some major figures of recent literary history, "the sheer mass and accompanying intellectual or ideological pressure of preexisting commentary make it necessary for criticism to perform a backflip and survey its own history."[88] And given

[88] Brooker, Joseph. *Joyce's Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture.* Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2004. p. 4

this apparent necessity, the scholarly reader of Joyce must be prepared to recognize "the contingency of [her] own views" (Brooker 4). If there are so many critical and historical interpretations of Joyce's work (15,000 bibliographical entries – "monographs, articles, theses, translations, and editions" – according to a count already five years old[89]), each adopting their own idiosyncratic methodologies or championing their preferred theory or interpretive discourse, then a reader who would add their own voice to the cacophony cannot but acknowledge that it has no special claim to any sort of mastery of the text. More readings will be produced, under-examined themes and unknown sources will come to light, and new theoretical vogues will arrive: the Joyce critic is equally crushed by the weight of the past and vulnerably exposed to an all-consuming future. Perhaps, appropriately enough, the time of Joyce scholarship is circularly Viconian, and readers of *Ulysses* will endless re-stage their own modernist break with the critical orthodoxies of the past.

More seriously, though, it suffices to observe that the history of critical approaches to *Ulysses* lays bare the history of critical theory in the twentieth century more generally (a fact which is also the subject of book-length studies, as in Geert Lernout's *The French Joyce* (1990)[90] and Jeffrey Segall's *Joyce in America: Cultural Politics and the Trials of Ulysses* (1993)[91], both cited by Brooker). Modern theories of the novel

[89] Latham, Sean. "Twenty-first-century critical contexts," in *James Joyce in Context*. Ed. John McCourt. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. p. 148
[90] Lernout, Geert. *The French Joyce.* Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1991.
[91] Segall, Jeffrey. *Joyce in America: Cultural Politics and the Trials of Ulysses*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1993.

are clearly obliged to explain one of that genre's most notorious exemplars, and so the history of theoretical approaches to *Ulysses* naturally contains *in nuce* the history of "theory" in general. In the briefest of sketches, this trajectory contains the early years of formalist, literary-historical, and biographical criticism (e.g. Harry Levin, Richard Ellmann, and Hugh Kenner), covers the dramatic entrance of theory into the Joycean institution (from Fredric Jameson's idiosyncratic Marxism to such "post-structuralists" as Colin MacCabe and Derek Attridge, from the feminism of such writers as Bonnie Kime Scott to psychoanalytic studies by Luke Thurston and Shelly Brivic), and finally reaches the present-day interest in a post-colonial Joyce, genetic textual studies, Irish identity politics, and forms of radical historicism. Each of these approaches suggest that fresh perspectives on *Ulysses* will continue to appear as our language for describing the form, techniques, ideologies, and histories of the novel is refined. How and whether these approaches are justified in seeing themselves reflected in the language of *Ulysses*, meanwhile, can only be settled with respect to individual cases.

Of course, this is a situation generated by *Ulysses* itself in its encyclopedic ambition, or what Lewis initially mocked as its resemblance to a "general-knowledge paper." No less confident a reader than Jacques Derrida recognized this even while feeling compelled to advertise his own anxieties about critical competence when addressing the International James Joyce Symposium thirty years ago, at the invitation of Jean-Michel Rabaté. Speaking to the gathered Joyceans (admitting, if somewhat

facetiously, that "nothing intimidates me more than a community of experts in Joycean matters"), he makes certain to emphasize the difference between himself and his expert colleagues: "that is the difference of competence. All of you are experts, you belong to one of the most remarkable of institutions."[92] Derrida goes on to describe this institution of Joyce critics as "a reading machine" made both indispensable and impossible by Joyce himself. And so "the intimidation amounts to this: Joyce experts are the representatives as well as the effects of the most powerful project for programming over the centuries the totality of research in the onto-logico-encyclopedic field … a Joyce scholar has the right to dispose the totality of competence in the encyclopedic field of the *universitas*. He has at his command the computer of all memory, he plays with the entire archive of culture," and so on (Derrida 281). While a more detailed explanation of Derrida's passing reference to "the onto-logico-encylopedic field" might be productive, it would have but limited relevance to the analysis that this chapter will pursue. It is enough to briefly note that the encyclopedia – a written compendium of all knowledge produced in every discipline (i.e., the university) – was envisioned by Diderot as a transmission to future generations for the preservation of knowledge after death;[93] in other words, it is or it

[92] Derrida, Jacques. "Ulysses Gramophone," in *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 268.

[93] In the self-reflective entry on "encyclopedia" in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encylopedia*, Diderot says that the latter's purpose is "to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come." Diderot, Denis. "Encyclopedia." *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project.* Trans. Phil Stewart. Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of

aims to be a total memory trace that encodes and enshrines the adequacy of words to things. This is a fitting analogy, since Joyce's ambition was notoriously for *Ulysses* to accomplish exactly the same function: he wrote to Frank Budgen that he wanted "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book."[94] Meanwhile, Derrida effectively imagines how *Ulysses* constructs its ideal reader, the "reading machine" adequate to this finally completed picture. De-personalized, lacking subjectivity because reduced the function of processing bits of textual information, a "hypermnesic" repository of all memory disconnected from this or that body: this "reader" is in itself no one, a mindless input/output machine equipped only to recognize and express the encyclopedic whole of the novel. The erasure of sense, meaning, and subjectivity that haunts this image of the "reader" (and other versions of Joyce's reader, conspicuously already created and anticipated by *Finnegans Wake*, where "that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" makes a literal appearance) will be clarified in what follows.[95]

Before taking the first steps in my investigation of materialism in "Ithaca," I will briefly pause to anticipate and explain my approach to the interpretation of *Ulysses*

Michigan Library, 2002. Web. 11 Nov. 2013. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.004>. Trans. of "Encyclopédie,"*Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 5. Paris, 1755.

[94] Budgen, Frank. *James Joyce and the Making of* Ulysses, *and other writings*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972 [1934].

[95] Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999 [1939]. p. 120 (The convention is to cite the *Wake* by page and line number of this edition, which follows the first [Faber and Faber] of 1939. In this case: 120.12-13).

given the peculiar critical situation which I've just characterized. How should the question of materialism in Joyce be situated with respect the enormous and sophisticated body of secondary literature addressed to *Ulysses* alone? In fact, I will eventually argue that it is a common but serious mistake to continue to associate Joyce's novel with materialism without first engaging in careful reflection on the usage and justification of that notoriously vague terminology. At the same time, the critical situation suggests that the idea of real "progress" in producing new readings of Joyce is utterly misplaced; if it doesn't commit the theoretical sin of presupposing the *telos* of a last word on *Ulysses*, then it at least hubristically neglects the irredeemably contingent and transitory character of reading in the face of all we know about the history and the future of the novel's reception. It likewise reveals the discomforting possibility that *Ulysses* is ultimately only a mirror for those many theories of the novel or of literature *tout court,* which have therefore seen in it really only their own reflection.

This is not idle anxiety about the possibility or impossibility of saying anything new, because it bears in a specific way on the position of Joyce in the argument of this dissertation, with respect to both Virginia Woolf and to modernism at large. I have already emphasized that many of the conclusions I drew with respect to *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* are specific to Woolf and to a lesser extent her intellectual and cultural climate. Unlike Joyce, Woolf explicitly builds a literary doctrine out of the rejection of materialism in the novel; while it's a noteworthy clue that she saw a potential ally on the side of "life" against materialism in what she had

initially read of *Ulysses*[96], this obviously tells us more about Woolf than it does about Joyce. When she says that "Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain," and so on, it is not a dramatic stretch to see in her commendation a bit of self-advertisement, if not outright self-description. And when she archly concludes her brief on Joyce with the claim that "if we want life itself" then it's surely to be found in Joyce's "scene in the cemetery" (Woolf 1984, 151) – i.e., the "Hades" episode – we should not let the irony pass without notice (a sentiment confirmed privately in a diary entry from August 1922, where Woolf writes that she "dislike[s] *Ulysses* more and more," that she finds it "more and more unimportant," and finally that she no longer "trouble[s] conscientiously to make out its meanings").[97] Woolf's published and private judgments have the important consequence, for my argument, of relatively downplaying the influence of Joyce on Woolf. The organization of the dissertation reflects this: by going chronologically backwards, it aims at the specificity of the problem of materialism in the work of both writers even while it hopes to produce a conclusion that situates the two writers on the same terrain vis-à-vis materialism and the novel form. How ought the question of Joyce's relation to materialism be posed,

[96] The revised edition of "Modern Fiction" was appeared in *The Common Reader* in 1925, obviously after the publication of *Ulysses*; an earlier version entitled "Modern Novels" was published in *TLS* in 1919, so Woolf's references to *Ulysses* in the later revision only reflect a reading of the available chapters of *Ulysses* which were serialized in *The Little Review* between 1918 and 1920.

[97] Bell, Anne Oliver, ed. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Two: 1920-1924.* New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. pp. 195-6.

then, while both preserving the specificity of this question with respect to *Ulysses* and justifying the comparison between Woolf and Joyce that is an implicit ground of the argument as a whole? This is a central methodological problem that the analysis to follow will have to resolve.

Taken as a whole, the entire preceding explication of the peculiarity of the Joycean critical situation, both in general and in this dissertation, functions not just to exacerbate authorial hand-wringing about the stakes of intervening in such a well-established sub-discipline of English literature and of modernist studies in general. On the contrary, these remarks situate and preface the following, somewhat astonishing, claim: that while the implicit or explicit association of Joyce's fiction with materialism, in one form or another, is both long-standing and familiar, very few Joyce scholars have made the theme or the concept of materialism an explicit object of critical or theoretical interrogation. There are no book-length monographs in English that make Joyce's materialism – or failing that, Joyce's expressed or endorsed attitude toward materialism – a dominant theme worthy of detailed elaboration, and there are but a smattering of article-length studies that make materialism a primary object of critical attention and concern.[98] It is surprising, to say the least, that this is true in an institutional and intellectual atmosphere in which it is easy to take at face value the claims that Joyce is somehow a materialist, that failing that he is sympathetic to

[98] The best example I've found is Platt, L.H. "If Brian Boru Could But Come Back and See the Old Dublin Now: Materialism, the National Culture, and *Ulysses* 17" in *Joyce's "Ithaca" (European Joyce Studies 6*). Ed. Andrew Gibson. Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1996.

philosophical materialism, or finally that his work enshrines and privileges "materiality" in a unique and uniquely significant way. The notion of materialism makes frequent appearances in the literature on *Ulysses*, even though few critics have troubled to offer a sustained explanation or appreciation of why materialism is evidently such an appealing description for Joyce as a writer or *Ulysses* as a novel. It's not as if such explanations aren't available, and it's not as if critics are so naïve to employ the related concepts of materialism and materiality when describing, say, the theme and the imagery of the human body in *Ulysses*. Rather, it's the fact that the use of these terms often seems so *unremarkable* – literally not deserving further remark – that stands out so starkly. It's in no small part the unremarkable status of materialism in Joyce that this chapter aims to rectify.

Where has the idea of materialism appeared explicitly in Joyce? It was suggested above that while "materialism" as an object of explicit approbation makes very visible appearances in Woolf, this is not exactly the case in Joyce's writing: there's no especially compelling reason to think that "materialism" was one of Joyce's words. It does appear infrequently in his critical and occasional writing. In a brief review of the Scottish classicist John Burnet's edition of *Aristotle on Education* that appeared in Dublin's *Daily Express* in 1903, for example, a young Joyce wrote that the book's value was tied not to its negligible contribution to contemporary philosophical literature but instead to the salutary reminder of Aristotle's thought "at the present time, when the scientific specialists and the whole cohort of Materialists are cheapening the good

name of philosophy."[99] It's possible to pinpoint various sources for the indictment of science and materialism with which Joyce concludes his brief review, some of which will be discussed below. In general, though, the sentiment gives the impression of being extremely conventional for an educated young man who was aware of fashionable ideas in Dublin literary and intellectual circles, particularly those of Yeats – who saw in the freshness of British and European "symbolism" a quasi-Romantic rejection of "nineteenth-century materialism."[100] But that is by no means evidence for thinking that the use of "materialism" in his Burnet review is the mark of an incipient aesthetic or literary doctrine: apart from its defense of philosophy from the encroachment of science (and presumably above all from the science of the body that ostensibly threatens to collapse "spirit" into an occult quality), it stands out only for being fairly unremarkable.

Further reference to "materialism" appeared in Joyce's writing ten years later, in the spring of 1912. Joyce, then living in Trieste (at the time located in Austria-Hungary), attempted to gain certification from the Italian government to teach in public schools in Italy. The attempt was ultimately blocked by Italian officials due to concerns, no doubt exaggerated, about Joyce's Irish degrees. Before that, though,

[99] Joyce, James. *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writings*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. p. 80. Cited hereafter as *OCP*.

[100] Which is not to say that Joyce explicitly endorsed Yeats's ideas (see, for example, Yeats's own account of his first meeting with Joyce in October 1902, originally intended for publication in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and reproduced in Ellmann's seminal biography. (Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce* (revised ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959 [rev. 1982]. pp. 101-3. Cited hereafter as *JJ*.)

Joyce traveled to Padua for examinations at the Università degli Studi; this would serve to establish his competence in speaking, writing, and translating English and Italian.[101] Joyce composed and submitted two examination essays for the university in Padua: one on Dickens (1912 was the hundredth anniversary of his birth) and one on "L'influenza letterario universal del rinascimento," that is, "The Universal Literary Influence of the Renaissance."[102] The latter essay, written during a period when Joyce was in urgent search of a publisher for *Dubliners*, fleshes out in only slightly more detail the indictment of materialism found in the Burnet review. Given the circumstances of this essay's composition, it's difficult to say exactly what sorts of claims it may warrant, but there's no reason to think that it doesn't present some glimpse of Joyce's considered views on European art and culture of the day. Furthermore, even though the essay focuses primarily on the consequences of the historical Renaissance, it may not be inappropriate to see in this inquiry a *sotto voce* appraisal of both the prospects for and the meaning of cultural renewal in the twentieth century. And if this is to be found, it's because Joyce is quite skeptical about the influence of the actual Renaissance on the present (if indeed we find disapproval in the claims that "the Renaissance … has placed the journalist in the monk's chair" or that Shakespeare is "to a certain extent responsible for modern cinematography" [*OCP* 188]. Joyce opens the essay by characterizing the technological advances

[101] Cf. *JJ* 320-1.
[102] *OCP* 187-190

accomplished by the age, visually evident "on the street of a large modern city: the electric tram, telegraph wires, the humble and necessary postman," (187) and so on. "But in the midst of this complex and many-sided civilization the human mind," he continues, "almost terrorized by material greatness, becomes lost, denies itself and grows weaker." With that thesis, he arrives at the guiding question of the essay as a whole: "should we then conclude that present-day materialism, which descends in a direct line from the Renaissance, atrophies the spiritual faculties of man, impedes his development, blunts his keenness?" (*ibid.*).

Joyce answers essentially in the affirmative, lamenting the "degeneration" of Renaissance intellectual and aesthetic virtues into "frenetic sensationalism" (*ibid.*). In a memorable formula, he says "of modern man that he has an epidermis rather than a soul" (188-89). Joyce depicts a culture and an art fixated on the minutiae of detail and of circumstance, and decries the "literary jargon" that "speaks of nothing else than local colour, atmosphere, [and] atavism," the sources of a "the restless search for what is new and strange, the accumulation of details that have been observed or read, the parading of common culture" (*ibid.*). Already we see that, despite the unusual circumstances in this essay was composed and the fair assumption that it was never intended for publication, the appearance of "present-day materialism" here is much more significant in connection with a literary and aesthetic doctrine. Joyce's rhetorical associations with materialism are both deeper and more revealing: the latter seems to be able to stand for the loss of morality, the weakening of imaginative creativity, the

value of the ideal as opposed to the accumulation of fact or sheer data, the technological transformation of everyday life in bourgeois society, and scientific forms of knowledge. While the idea that materialism might successfully encode all of these negative values is telling, the associations that Joyce produces remain in and of themselves fairly conventional. What *is* notable is role of literature in both reflecting and producing these social and intellectual ills. The aesthetic heart of the essay arrives with the apparent repudiation of the "most characteristic works that we possess," which are "simply amoral" (*ibid.*). Maurice Maeterlinck, Anatole France, and Ivan Turgenev are given as examples, but the climax of the argument is the comparison between Wagner and Dante that concludes: "one is the art of circumstance, the other is ideational" (*ibid.*). Wagner inevitably suffers in comparison with the author of the *Inferno*, in whom Joyce sees an image of the atlas-maker of the Middle Ages inscribing "*hic sunt leones*" on the unknown areas of the world: "the idea of solitude, the terror of strange beasts, the unknown were enough for him. Our culture has an entirely different goal: we are avid for details" (*ibid.*).[103] Materialism, in other words, is not just a vague malady of the present age, but a compositional and aesthetic principle refined by most revered and exemplary artworks; equally remarkable is the image of artistic "ideation" that Joyce opposes to aesthetic materialism. Where the latter seeks the

[103] Joyce's professed distaste for Wagner is well-documented, so his disparagement of *Tristan and Isolde* is not unexpected; however, cf. Martin, Timothy. *Joyce and Wagner: A Study of Influence*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. Martin says, for example, that "Joyce's denigration of Wagner … implies much more than simple iconoclasm, for it represents a general antagonism toward the cultural authorities of his day," (166) but that "even the quickest glance … shows the extent to which Joyce's work takes up the Wagnerian gauntlet" (188).

accumulation and multiplication of sense data (as in the Wagnerian reproduction of "every pulsation, every tremor, the lightest shiver, the lightest sigh" [*ibid.*] experienced in love and in accord, certainly, with the ongoing refinement of technologies for isolating and measuring the mechanisms of sensation[104]), the art of ideation encounters a moment of sheer creation. When the atlas-maker inscribes the void, he makes a figure for a reality inaccessible to ordinary vision; where this vision fails at the edge of the known world, a pure creation is demanded: *hic sunt leones*. A comparison with Nietzsche – *Joyce contra Wagner* – might strongly suggest itself.

I will return to these passages and this image of the (Dantean) atlas-maker inscribing the void in some of what follows, but at this point there is sufficient evidence for the claim that materialism is not an especially important concept or category for the historical Joyce. Where it does appear, it has a conventional and unremarkably negative connotation. Indeed, what's most important about the appearance of "present-day materialism" in the examination essay on the Renaissance is its rhetorical association with what Joyce perceives as a failed "art of circumstance." It produces an image of the aesthetic implications of materialism, particularly in its imagination of the encounter with the conceptual void of unknown territory[105], that

[104] Regarding this second point, the scholarship of Jonathan Crary is especially valuable for its historical and philosophical interpretation of "the division and fragmentation of the physical subject into increasingly specific organic and mechanical systems" (81) and related technological, physiological, and philosophical developments in the nineteenth century (Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992.). See also Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

[105] It is easy to imagine, here, how the image of the atlas-maker would likewise be incorporated into arguments about the post-colonial Joyce.

will inform my reading of "Ithaca," but it likewise suggests a distinct sense of resentment directed at more esteemed peers by a writer who was still struggling to find a publisher for his collection of short stories. In other word, it stands for polemic as much as doctrine.

At any rate, this brief reading of the anti-materialism of the young Joyce is designed to set up a second and rather important question. That is: on what basis do scholars and readers of Joyce find such compelling reason to think of him either as a materialist or as a writer who enshrines materiality in some unique way (allowing that these two descriptions may coextensive), particularly given Joyce's own conventional and generally negative attitude on the subject? The short answer and insufficient answer, of course, is that they base such claims on the interpretation of his work, and there is no good reason to suppose that reading an author's work "against" his or her actual or hypothetical interpretations of the latter is in principle illegitimate. In order to understand how and why the concept of materialism has been apparently so alluring a description of Joyce, then, we need to look at the sort of interpretive labor that it has been thought (or assumed) to perform.

It turns out that this labor is great indeed, appropriately enough for a novel and a body of scholarship that bears such encyclopedic ambitions. Critics have discerned either an explicitly materialist dimension or the theme of philosophical materialism in play in (at least) six, sometimes related or overlapping, thematic areas of *Ulysses*. These dimensions, in summary form, are as follows: (a) the human body (or sometimes its

products); (b) Dublin and turn of the century urban life; (c) the philosophy of thinkers like Aquinas and Aristotle; (d) science; (e) language, either represented thought and speech or the text's narrative discourse; (f) theosophy and/or the Irish literary revival. Clearly the purview of materialism as an explanatory device (or as a rhetorical tool) is vast, since this brief list is coextensive with many of the great themes of *Ulysses* as a whole. An effort to catalogue with exactitude the invocation of materialism in all of these areas would be the goal of a much larger study than the present one; it is necessary, however, to get a sense of how the ostensibly materialist dimension of *Ulysses* has been evoked and described, especially before setting out to correct that evocation in my reading of "Ithaca." For that reason I will expand very briefly on relevance of materialism for each of the thematic dimensions outlined above, and will give more sustained critical attention to what is perhaps the most exemplary of the "materialist" dimensions of *Ulysses*, i.e., the latter's discourse on the body.

In fact, the idea that *Ulysses* ought to be understood in terms of its putative materialism is a much older one than might be suspected. Theoretically revisionary accounts of modernist texts have multiplied under the contemporary fascination with textual and cultural materiality, and recent modernist studies have rectified the standard interpretations of literary modernism in terms of its inward turns, intensifications of subjectivity, and so on. This background of recent interpretive trends is visible in, for example, Sara Danius's recent claim that "Joyce's great achievement is to have taken literary materialism to a wholly new level, that is, to the

basest level possible: he introduced money, sex, and snot into serious literature."[106] In fact, according to Danius, he did accomplished this great achievement "without fanfare" (*ibid.*). This second claim is a hyperbolic, to say the least. Certainly the censorship of *Ulysses* in the United States after the publication of the "Nausicaa" episode (and Bloom's masturbatory response to Gerty McDowell's exhibition of her knickers) in *The Little Review* testifies to *Ulysses*'s early reputation for baseness and even pornographic obscenity (indeed, the critical fixation on bodily substance extends even to Judge Woolsey, whose decision in 1933 finally allowed *Ulysses* to be printed in the U.S.: "whilst in many places the effect of *Ulysses* … undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be aphrodisiac" (*JJ* 667).

Besides recent theoretical interventions and that infamous episode in the novel's publication history, the centrality of the human body to the novel has been visible from the start. Richard Aldington wrote (already in 1921) that *Ulysses* was "disgusting with a reason;" this was no complement since it predicted a pernicious influence on future writers, who were in Aldington's eyes granted license to be "disgusting without reason" (Deming 188).[107] Aldington laments Joyce's missed potential, wishing he had not "returned to the bastard genre of the Naturalistes who mingle satire and tragedy," and that he "had hoped to see [Joyce's] characters emerge

[106] Danius, Sara. "Joyce's Scissors: Modernism and the Dissolution of the Event." *New Literary History* 39.4 (Autumn 2008). p. 1007.
[107] Aldington, Richard. "The Influence of Mr. James Joyce." *English Review* xxxii (April 1921): pp. 333-41. Excerpted in Deming, Robert (ed.). *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage. Volume I: 1907-27.* London and New York: Routledge, 1970.

into a clearer air from the sordid arena in which they were subdued by Fate in a debris of decayed vegetables and putrid exhalations" (187-88). It's hard not to see in Aldington's repudiation of Joyce's "influence" a pun; certainly he fears a generation of young writers who will pick up Joyce without appreciating the various (ostensible) failures of its form and style, but at the same time he hints at a more literal influence – that is, the flow of sordid matter – through the novel's pages.

Soon after the initial reception of *Ulysses* had been formulated, Wyndham Lewis made this double influence even more explicit in his peculiar treatise (a combination of philosophy, literary criticism, and polemic) on *Time and Western Man*. Where Danius's remark seems to make "literary materialism" primarily a matter of the novel's content, Lewis evokes more explicitly the Ulyssean formal "influence" In a well-known attack, Lewis identifies the "stupendous outpouring of *matter*, or *stuff*" in *Ulysses*, expressing the readerly wish "to be transported to some more abstract region for a time, where the dates of the various toothpastes, the brewery and laundry receipts, the growing pile of punched 'bus-tickets, the growing holes in the baby's socks and the darn that repairs them, assume less importance" (Lewis 89). Lewis constantly has recourse to metaphors of digestion and excretion in his critique the Ulyssean "glut of matter." The "movement of the narrative" in which a "dense mass of dead stuff" is collected induces "constipation;" (*ibid.*) Joyce had "an appetite that certainly never will be matched again for the actual *matter* revealed in his composition" (90). Finally, revoltingly, Lewis sees in Joyce the inheritance of a "nineteenth-century

naturalism" (repeating Aldington's judgment), which in *Ulysses* is like "the voluminous curtain that fell, belated (with the alarming momentum of a ton or two of personally organized rubbish), upon the victorian scene. So rich was its delivery, its pent-up outpouring so vehement, that it will remain, eternally cathartic, a monument like a record diarrhoea" (*ibid.*). The novel "collects like a cistern … the last stagnant pumpings of victorian anglo-irish life" (*ibid.*).

Despite Lewis's vivid and unappetizing image of *Ulysses* as a cistern for the nineteenth century, his account at least has the virtue of constructing the ostensibly materialist element of Joyce in a manner that in some ways contravenes the implicit notion of a "literary materialism" such as Danius describes it. In that description, the "glut of matter" on display in *Ulysses* seems to be by itself sufficient evidence for the latter's materialism. Danius writes, for instance, that Joyce "effected a kind of neutralization of the content" (1007). This so-called neutralization is partially an effect of the putative leveling of the relative importance of events or other objects of narration in Joyce, since they are all equally accorded their place in the record of a single day. The narration of Bloom's outhouse activities (in "Calypso," the morning episode that introduces Bloom, for example, when the latter relieves himself while reading the periodical *Tit-bits*: "Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that

slight constipation of yesterday quite gone" (*U* 4.506-09)[108] – here it's clear where Lewis found inspiration for his excretory motif) is from Danius's point of view "neutral" in relation to any other narrated action, event, or object. According to Danius, this neutralization of content has as its corollary the highlighting of linguistic form, and so Bloom's defecation becomes in this sense a "linguistic event" (Danius 1007). This seems extremely inconsistent with the idea that Joyce's writing represents a "literary materialism," however, because it (a) makes no distinction at the level of content between the representation of material, physical objects or bodies and any other novelistic content and so it (b) subordinates the putatively material – say, the unremitting and unflinching incorporation of mundane bodily existence into the tradition of literary realism – to the character of its representation in language or its quality as a "linguistic event." When Danius says of Joyce that "he told a tale that ultimately explodes the realist novel from within – precisely by taking realism to extremes" (1009) in the scandalous narrative accumulation of detail, she arrives at a point that weakens the rhetoric of materialism even further.

How is this so? Just as Lewis's account suggests, what we recognize as a scandalous and materialist fixation on the body (and on the influence of dead things) is emphatically a willed negation of nineteenth-century codes and conventions, not to mention social and cultural mores. Certainly the narrative selection and depiction of

[108] Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Hans Walter Gabler (ed.). New York: Vintage Books, 1986. Hereafter cited in text as *U*, with the conventional citation by episode and line number.

bodily functions shatters the division between public and private that the realist novel had conventionally erected. According to such conventions it is practically impossible to imagine the length and richness of narrative interest devoted to Stephen's visual attention and internal monologue, walking on Sandymount Strand in the "Proteus" episode, to a wandering dog sniffing at its fellow's corpse, urinating, and rooting in the sand: "the carcass lay on his path. He stopped, sniffed, stalked round it, brother, nosing closer, went round it, sniffling rapidly like a dog all over the dead dog's bedraggled fell (*U* 3.348-50) … Along by the edge of the mole he lolloped, dawdled, smelt a rock and from under a cocked hindleg pissed against it. He trotted forward and, lifting again his hindleg, pissed quick short at an unsmelt rock. The simple pleasures of the poor. His hindpaws then scattered the sand: then his forepaws dabbled and delved" (*U* 3.356-60). Here Stephen's recognition of the "simple pleasures of the poor" in the dog's urination on the strand even makes explicit the norms of privacy that the passage plays a role in negotiating, since they find in the animal's unashamed daytime excretion a "simple pleasure" that is presumably available to Stephen only behind closed doors. But it is the formal power of the narrator to open all such doors, and so to elevate the intricate banalities of daily life and its attendant "glut of matter," bodily and otherwise, to public view *via* narration. It's in this way that social and even anthropological rules, mores, and structures that govern the distinction between the public and private intersect with both the basic distinction of narrative as a form (that is, between "story" and "discourse" or the

material of the plot and the order and mode of its presentation in the narrator's discourse) and with the historical unfolding of that form (in conventions that establish what story elements require or deserve presentation).

Subsequently, Stephen is given the chance to indulge in this "simple pleasure" of the dog, in a setting that once again stages the boundary between the public and the private – close to dawn in Bloom's back garden, standing next to Bloom while both men urinate and shield their genitals (in the latinate scientific and medical language of the parodically "objective" narrator of "Ithaca," their "organs of micturition") from view. Bloom and Stephen have returned to Bloom's house at 7 Eccles Street after the day's activity, to have a cup of cocoa. Eventually the pair enter the garden in the back of the house. The impersonal narrative of the catechism gives this egress a comically Biblical connotation: "with what attendant ceremony was the exodus from the house of bondage to the wilderness of inhabitation effected?" (*U* 17.1021-22). After perhaps the most explicitly poetic and blatantly figural use of language in the entire episode (in a passage that has been widely remarked upon and will be discussed below; in connection with this discussion, it's worth noting the rapidity with which the narrative gaze and interest shuttles between beauty and baseness: "What spectacle confronted them when they, first the host, then the guest, emerged silently … into the penumbra of the garden? The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" [*U* 17.1036-39]), and the respective contemplation of the cosmic spectacle of the night sky above Dublin, Bloom and Stephen do not remain

"indefinitely inactive" (*U* 17.1185); instead, "at Stephen's suggestion, at Bloom's instigation both, first Stephen, then Bloom, in penumbra urinated, their sides contiguous, their organs of micturition reciprocally rendered invisible by manual circumposition, their gazes, first Bloom's, then Stephen's, elevated to the projected luminous and semiluminous shadow" (*U* 17.1186-90). This time, however, Stephen's thoughts turn not to the pleasures of sheer corporeality but instead to questions about Catholic doctrine concerning the body of Christ. The fact that "invisible audible" (*U* 17.1200) urination of Bloom provokes in Stephen the imagination of theological disputes about the nature limits of divine embodiment – i.e., in general, the thought of the dead matter of the body as a sign – is a perhaps a predictable illustration of the imagery that dominates so much of the young lapsed Catholic's imaginative life. But it's not only typical that the "problems presented" (*ibid.*) to Stephen at the sound of Bloom's urination include "the problem of the sacerdotal integrity of Jesus circumcised … and the problem as to whether the divine prepuce, the carnal bridal ring of the holy Roman catholic apostolic church, conserved in Calcata, were deserving of simple hyperduly or of the fourth degree of latria accorded to the abscission of such divine excresences as hair and toenails" (*U* 17.1203-09) (or, in other words, whether the foreskin of Christ warranted the veneration [latria] properly accorded to God or only that accorded to Mary [hyperduly]). The theological question about whether these excresences sufficiently present or represent divinity anticipates and mirrors the critical effort to read meaning into contingent, seemingly extraneous

matter, an effort that *Ulysses* seemingly invites at every turn. The imagery of the remains and relics of a dead god is likewise an image of the novel. It's noteworthy that this invitation comes at a moment of apparent sacrilege but also in a scene and episode where the artificiality of narrative convention is on brazen display. The narrator's question about which problems were "presented" to Bloom and Stephen in reaction to the sound of urination, and the indirect discourse of the response, makes no attempt to hide the novelistic convention of making thought or interior life transparent to the reader: while Stephen's thoughts turn to parts abscised from the body of Christ, Bloom's are more earthly and are presented in the form of a list – typically of "Ithaca," there's no narrative effort at an exactingly realistic stream of consciousness or *monologue interieur* to be found in Bloom's precise but indistinct thoughts of "irritability, tumescence, rigidity, reactivity, dimension, sanitariness, and pilosity" (*U* 17.1201-02).

There are many available ways to understand these scenes of uncultured animality and bodily discharge, but it is at the very least an exaggeration to say that don't uniquely make themselves dramatically visible by contravening some principle of literary decorum as well as established conventions guiding the narrative selection of material for representation. And to the extent that this is true, the celebration of their putative materialism either misses the mark or empties out the notion of materialism: if the representation of bodily matter and the vicissitudes of embodiment are supposed to contest or stand in recalcitrant opposition to ideality and the

abstraction of the subject,[109] then the blatant historical and generic mediation of such representation only reinstates a subject of history and generic convention. They propose a reader able to recognize in them a simultaneous negation and exacerbation of the techniques of literary realism. Ezra Pound's remark to the American lawyer and patron of modernism, John Quinn, early in the history of the composition of *Ulysses* (after Joyce had circulated the *Telemachiad* or first three episodes) is instructive in this regard. After, Ellmann notes, Quinn was "taken aback" by the language of "Telemachus" (perhaps Buck Mulligan's revision, looking out onto the Irish Sea, of the Homeric "winedark:" "a new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen. You can almost taste it, can't you?" [*U* 1.73-74]), "Pound had to write him on April 3 [1918] a vigorous defense: 'I can't agree with you about Joyce's first chapter. I don't think the passages about [Stephen's] mother's death and the sea would would come with such force if they weren't imbedded in squalor and disgust" (*JJ* 421). Whether or not we agree with Pound's defense in exactly these terms, the general point stands: the more

[109] This argumentative strategy has been adopted by Christine van Boheemen-Saaf, and I suggest it guides Danius's affiliation of the "base" level of bodily fluids and naked sexuality – e.g., Bloom's onanism in "Nausicaa" – with the domain of a "literary materialism." Boheemen-Saaf's account focuses on the climactic "Penelope" episode and its implicit and explicit contestation, via its emphasis embodiment and the female body in particular, of the conventional conclusions of philosophical idealism. Boheemen-Saaf's essay, "Joyce's Answer to Philosophy: Writing the Dematerializing Object" (in *Joyce, "Penelope," and the Body (European Joyce Studies 17*). Ed. Richard Brown. Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2006) is another exemplary interpretation of Joyce's ostensible materialism and Joycean materiality. Boheemn-Saaf argues, for example, that "the hyper-real … physicality of Joyce's 'Penelope' embodies a response countering the Enlightenment construction of the bodiless subject," (32-33); following Joyce's provocative suggestion to editor and patron Harriet Shaw Weaver that he "rejected the usual interpretation of her as a human apparition (…). In conception and technique I tried to depict the earth which is prehumen and presumably posthuman" (Ellmann, Richard, ed. *Selected Joyce Letters.* New York: The Viking Press, 1975 [1957]. p. 289), Boheemen-Saaf proposes that "Penelope" generally and the body of Molly Bloom in particular "represents materiality or physicality as a timeless presence," (34) and ultimately concludes that Joyce's writing, especially his obscenity, represents a "fantasmatic attempt to rematerialize the body as the shape and figure of the primal object: a Penelope mythically fertile" (46).

emphatically obscene or unflinchingly base the content, the more it stands out as a comment on and departure from a tradition (and one that is in some sense not absolutely given *qua* tradition etched in stone, but constructed by this comment and this departure); the more the effort at a figuration of ostensibly sheer materiality is in evidence, the more the formal and technical apparatus for presenting this figuration comes into view.

In a different context, Danius has argued that *Ulysses* participates in a distinctly modernist "shift from idealist theories of aesthetic gratification to essentially materialist ones" which conceive "aesthetic experience [as] based in a notion of the immanence of the body."[110] It does so, according to Danius, primarily by way of its stylistic and grammatical autonomization and reification of hearing and eyesight. As she says, "to explore how acts of perception are staged … is to uncover a powerful stylistic tendency that, on the level of the sentence, pulls toward differentiation and autonomization" (153). Danius underlines many instances where what she calls Joyce's "aesthetics of immediacy" is on view, and makes a compelling case for the idea that *Ulysses* both responds to and enacts a historical disarticulation of the senses that accompanies, for example, the new modes and techniques of recording and measuring perception (photography, cinematography, phonography, and telephony being only the most notorious examples; in this her account is clearly influenced by

[110] Danius, Sara. *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002. p. 194.

the work of media theorists like Friedrich Kittler and Jonathan Crary, and one of her main ideas that "Joyce's aesthetics comes into being as a solution to a historical problem – how to recover and represent the immediacy of lived experience in an age when modes of experience are continually reified by, among other things, the emergence of technologies for reproducing the visual and audible real" [192] draws its language from Fredric Jameson's notion of literary form as ideological "solution" to historical contradiction). Examples of this autonomization or disarticulation can be found across *Ulysses*, as Danius shows. In "Lotus Eaters," Bloom has paused while walking down Westland Row on the south side of Dublin, looking into the window of the "Belfast and Oriental Tea Company" (*U* 5.17-18); here is the narration of Bloom's reading of the "leadpapered packets" (*U* 5.18) of tea: "while his eyes still read blandly he took of his hat quietly inhaling his hairoil and sent his right hand with slow grace over his brow and hair … under their dropped lids his eyes found the tiny bow of the leather headband" (*U* 5.20-24). Danius observes here that "Bloom's body appears as an assemblage of independently operating parts, each differentiated, autonomous, and functionalized" (Danius 162). Even richer examples can be found in the "Nausicaa" episode (which according to the so-called Gilbert schema is categorized by the organ of the eye), when Bloom's erotic encounter with Gerty McDowell is mediated exclusively by vision. There – in a public setting on the Sandymount Strand while the visual attention of Gerty's friends is drawn skyward to evening fireworks – the direction of Bloom's gaze is focalized through Gerty:

> "and she saw a long Roman candle going up over the trees, up, up, and, in the tense hush, they were all breathless with excitement as it went higher and higher and she had to lean back more and more to lok up afer it, high, high, almost out of sight, and her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush from straining back and he could see her other things too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin … and she let him and she saw that he saw," (*U* 13.719-726)

and so on. This is of course a widely scrutinized scene, leading as it does to Gerty's departure and the scandal of Bloom's masturbation; Danius's remarks focus on the significance of Bloom's and Gerty's eyes assuming an agency that is integral to the story as such. "In effect," she writes, "eyes in *Ulysses* emerge as characters in their own right, appearing to operate independently of the human consciousness to vision is nevertheless related. Eyes claim autonomy for themselves, not just from the other senses and the human body at large but also from a central processing instance, the hermeneutic switchboard called the brain" (Danius 160).

In general, the evidence that Danius marshals in support of her claim about the disarticulation of organs of perception throughout *Ulysses*, in relation to the emergence of new techniques for isolating, recording, and reproducing sound and vision, appears favorable to the lucid and suggestive interpretation that she lends it. But the extent to which Joyce's ordering and representation of *aisthesis* can be

identified with a strictly materialist aesthetic theory grounded on the "immanence of the body" (194) or that is "enabled and inscribed by a historically specific discourse where the materiality of the body has become the privileged site of aesthetics and where perception is an aesthetically gratifying activity in its own right" (196) ought to be disputed. Certainly Danius admits that "Joycean visuality and aurality have to rely upon the eye – an eye that translates the diverse representations of sight and sound into mental sensations to be seen or heard in the silent interiority of the reader" and that "the immediacy of visuality and aurality require mediation" in print, an irony that is both "irreducible and inescapable" (185). If it's true that the visible linguistic matter of the written word relentlessly undermines the text's efforts at a depiction of immediacy or physiological immanence through formal and conventional means of "translation," then how much credence can be given to the conception Danius offers of Joyce's materialist aesthetic when the latter relies so heavily on ideas of either immediacy or the ostensible purification of perception in bodily immanence? First, Danius's perpetual insistence that Joyce's "aesthetics of immediacy" bears most explicitly on the representation of everyday life– e.g., in the claim that "Joyce's modernist artifact seeks to transcend the domain of literature, even the domain of art as such, attempting to capture the experience of everyday life in its lived immediacy" (187) – rings false. While there indeed appears to be a consensus that everyday "lived experience," a phrase which entered common usage as an approximate translation of

the German *Erlebnis*, is characterized by immediacy, *Ulysses* is if anything a monument to the unremitting mediation of ordinary conscious experience.

Warrant for this claim can be found on virtually every one of the novel's pages: the fact that Stephen's thoughts turn to theological disputes about the body of Christ just at the sound of Bloom's urination and the image of his circumcised penis is a proximate example but is no more emphatic in nature than all such depictions of the panoply of mediating forces acting on sheer perception in *Ulysses*; in another example from "Ithaca" that makes its (quasi-) narrative technique for the linguistic representation of sight and hearing even more explicit, the historical and temporal mediation of putatively sheer sensation is neatly distilled. In this scene Steven and Bloom are engaged in a linguistic comparison of "ancient Hebrew and ancient Irish" (*U* 17.724). The narrator here puts not only translation but the peculiar formal elements of written language on display (Stephen and Bloom perform an ad hoc "glyphic comparison of phonic symbols" (*U* 17.731) of Hebrew and Irish by written "juxtaposition … on the penultimate blank page of a book of inferior literary style" (*U* 17.733-34); their comparison is licensed, the narrator notes in academic style, by general "points of contact" between the two languages such as "the presence of guttural sounds, diacritic aspirations, epenthetic and servile letters," "their antiquity" and "their archaeological, genealogical, hagiographical, exegetical, homiletic, toponomastic, historical and religious literatures," and so on [*U* 17.745-753]). This brief but dense comparison (because formal, historical, cultural, and also political,

since the narrator draws attention to the parallel or "point of contact" between "the restoration in Chanah David of Zion and the possibility of Irish political autonomy or devolution" [*U* 17.759-60]) culminates in a depiction of sensation that is anything but pure or autonomous. The question "what was Stephen's auditive sensation?" (*U* 17.776) might invite a response that tried to capture in language the felt quality of hearing in such a manner that strategically emulates, say, the recording capacities of the phonograph. Instead, Stephen "heard in a profound ancient male unfamiliar melody" – Bloom chanting a half-forgotten anthem in Hebrew (*U* 17.763-64) – " the accumulation of the past" (*U* 17.777-78); likewise, Bloom's "visual sensation" (*U* 17.779) is of "a quick young male familiar form the predestination of a future" (*U* 17.780). The least that one can say about this figuration of sensation is that is mediated by language, and not in any abstract sense of the latter. By staging sensation and conscious awareness alongside the inscribed juxtaposition of ancient languages, in a manner that explicitly affirms the coincidence of form, history, and politics, (and even, comically, of superior "literary style"), this scene provides a compelling and distilled image of *Ulysses* as a whole.

This point leads to a broader one about the coordination of "materialism" and aesthetics which is the object of Danius's reading of Joyce and the subject matter of this dissertation as a whole. Putting skepticism about claims to immediacy aside, I want to transition to an argument about the appearance of this theme in "Ithaca" with a final remark about the idea of a materialist aesthetics in general. It's worth noting in

this regard – though it cannot be the decisive word on the subject – that the young Joyce himself, freshly arrived in Paris in early 1903, recorded his quasi-Aristotelian thoughts on aesthetics in a journal that survives as the "Paris Notebook." These are notes for a work on aesthetic theory that at that time he still hoped to write and which coincidentally or not he predicted would appear in print around 1922.[111] The notes themselves are brief and distinctly Aristotelian, having been written during a time in which Joyce spent his days at the Bibliothèque Nationale reading Victor Cousin's translations of Aristotle alongside the plays of Ben Jonson (*JJ* 120). Of primary interest in these notes is Joyce's formalist effort at defining the artwork in relation to "sensible or intelligible matter" (*OCP* 104). "Art," Joyce records, is the human disposition" of the latter "for an aesthetic end" (*ibid.*); on these terms, art can be formally distinguished from other kinds of physical objects as well as other means of producing or transforming matter. Hence "excrements, children, and lice" are not works of art even though they are "human dispositions of sensible matter,"[112] because "their end is not an aesthetic end" (*ibid.*). The same considerations can be devoted to other categories of objects; interestingly, the young Joyce considers it impossible for a photograph to be a work of art in the strict sense because, while it may have an

[111] It is widely known that he wrote to his mother in March of 1903 announcing that "my book of songs will be published in the spring of 1907. My first comedy about five years later. My "Esthetic" about five years later again" (*The Letters of James Joyce [Vol. 2]*. Richard Ellmann, ed. London: Faber, 1966. p. 38; cited at *OCP* 311).
[112] The inclusion of "lice" among children and excrement as human dispositions of sensible matter is more evidence of the young Joyce's Aristotelian influence; Aristotle adduced a theory of the spontaneous generation of fleas and lice from excrement, perspiration, and unclean flesh. Cf. *The History of Animals* 556b25-28 *et. passim.* Though the idea of spontaneous generation would have a lengthy subsequent history, it was essentially invalidated by the middle of the nineteenth century.

aesthetic end, it is a mechanical and not a human disposition of matter. A man "hacking in fury at a block of wood" may spontaneously create a mimetic sculpture – "an image of a cow (say)" – has the precisely the same formal status as excrement or children, i.e. a human disposition of sensible matter for no aesthetic end, and therefore cannot be considered art even if it resembles an artwork in every other respect (*ibid.*). And finally functional objects like "houses, clothes, furniture, etc." present a limit case – they are only works of art "when disposed for an aesthetic end," and so they at least raise the question of the artistic status of ornament. For the young Joyce this presents no apparent problem; such objects are "not necessarily" works of art, only when their matter is arranged, once again, for an aesthetic end (104-05).

We shouldn't necessarily give these youthful formulae much explanatory credence, particularly insofar as the fundamental concept of an "aesthetic end" seems hopelessly circular unless Joyce can define it such that it doesn't already contain the concept of "art;" otherwise the claim that "art is matter that a human has intentionally organized with the purpose of making it art" clarifies little. What we should emphasize instead is Joyce's early recognition of the artwork as a site of convergence between materiality and (some notion of) the aesthetic; I aim below to clarify this relation in "Ithaca." Danius's account of Joyce's ostensibly materialist aesthetics is by no means "reductive" in the sense that this epithet often receives in critical and literary-theoretical practice (where it typically connotes negation, elimination, or even rhetorical denigration), but her conception of a materialist or physiological theory of

the aesthetic, which she attributes to the Joyce of *Ulysses*, is avowedly reductive in the sense that it supposes that the definition and explanation of the aesthetic requires no other resources than an understanding of bodily matter (and its technological prostheses). Danius disputes the "idealist" notion – which she associates principally with Hegel's aesthetics – that "the work of art is an ideal site where spirit and matter intersect" (194) because in her view the ideality of sensation is disrupted by the technological and historical milieu in which sight and sound are exposed to meaningless mechanical reproduction. While Danius is no doubt correct to argue that "the ever-closer relation between the sensuous and the technological traverses the question of aesthetics" (*ibid.*), her appraisal of this traversal fails to assess the inextricability of the aesthetic and ideality ("spirit," in the Hegelian terms she denounces), which is in this sense properly irreducible. A full explanation and defense of this claim is outside the scope of the current argument, but my reading of "Ithaca" will develop it further in the context of Joyce's fiction. For now it is sufficient just to indicate that the thought of the immanence of the body and the disarticulation of eye and ear that Danius praises for its materialist refusal of spiritual mediation is not such a radical departure from the purview of philosophical aesthetics in a more recognizable form. The appeal to disarticulation of perception and of the immediate physical materiality of the body is intelligible only against the background of a subject of perception or of embodiment, and especially that subject's efforts and failures to both conceptualize and to make communicable the particulars of sensible

experience.[113] This is not to say that the aesthetic is submitted entirely to the general rule of the concept, but it *is* characterized by an encounter between the matter of perception and the various efforts to communicate it, represent it, conceptualize it, purify it, and so on. It's possible to see in the techniques of *Ulysses* for representing the immediacy of visual or aural perception (which Danius locates again and again) not the enshrinement of sheer disarticulation of the senses but an effort at communicating and making that disarticulation both historically and artistically intelligible; it stages, in other words, not materiality but the latter's aesthetic destiny. The effort at rendering immediacy cannot be the end of the story that Danius is telling, especially when that effort ironically translates and makes communicable the matter of the novel.

In what follows, then, I aim to extend these considerations to an episode of "Ithaca" that dramatizes, in absolutely idiosyncratic form, not only the various means and modalities of perception and purportedly immediate conscious awareness (such as we have already seen in the extended example of Stephen and Bloom urinating in the

[113] In this respect it is revealing that Danius concludes her account of a materialist aesthetics with a commendation the later work of Roland Barthes on photography, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Howard. London: Fontana, 1982). According to Danius, Barthes's notion of the *punctum,* which she says is a singular aesthetic experience located in the physiological immanence of the body and existing prior either to language or to cognition, "inverts the hierarchy of body and mind inherent in Western philosophy, including its theories of the aesthetic: 'I wanted to explore it ... not as a question (a theme) but a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think'" (Danius 196). She argues that this exemplifies Barthes's putative view that "perception, grounded in the body, is thus anterior to reflection. Ergo: I exist not so much because I think, but rather because I perceive," (*ibid*.) and so on. What Danius symptomatically fails to recognize in this instance, despite its repetition, is the "I" to which seeing, feeling, noticing, observing, and thinking *belongs* in Barthes's formulation. There is no evidence to be found here for a supposed "anteriority" of perceiving to the unity of a self – i.e., the self that attributes such perception to an identical "I." The disruption of the Cartesian problematic of the self is far more demanding than Danius suggests.

back garden of 7 Eccles Street) but, crucially, of their destruction, erasure, or negation. What I aim to show is that the oscillations on display in "Ithaca" between sensibility and insensibility, between the intimate world of selfhood and its absolute others, and between matter and thought form an important site for the novel's image of itself not as the fatally ironic depiction of sheer materiality but instead as the latter's necessary but incomplete idealization. What can be found in this image is not the enshrinement of matter for its own sake but a staging of a certain conception of the aesthetic and its limits.

This idealization is presented in multiple ways in "Ithaca." Two examples are particularly revealing become of how they invoke the flow or influence of matter that we have addressed above; where the Lewisian reading of *Ulysses* sees the entire novel as a sordid receptacle for a glut or flux of dead matter, the tendency toward idealization in "Ithaca" presents a different formal dynamic, according to which dead matter is given structure and meaning in literal and symbolic systems of circulation and exchange. It is accordingly justifiable to see these systems of circulation as allegories for the structuring and ordering work of the narrator. In the first of these examples, Bloom has reclined in his living room after Stephen's pre-dawn departure. He engages in a lengthy and intricately detailed fantasy of his "ultimate ambition" (*U* 17.1497), which is "not to inherit by right of primogeniture, gavelkind or borough English …. but to purchase by private treaty in fee simple a thatched bungalowshaped 2 storey dwellinghouse" (*U* 17.1499-1505). The insistence that Bloom makes, even in

fantasy, that this country estate (which Bloom imagines might possibly be named "Bloom Cottage," "St. Leopold's," or "Flowerville" [*U* 17.1580])be acquired in bourgeois fashion by private, contractually secured purchase rather than through feudal laws of property inheritance (i.e., primogeniture, gavelkind, or "borough English" or ultimogeniture) is stands out as unusual; it's not the (perhaps more typical) fantasy of an unexpected windfall or inheritance arriving out of nowhere. Bloom's imagination includes not only an exhaustive account of his future estate's features and accomodations, attractions, possible improvements, and nearby means of transportation but also a carefully documented plan of payment (cf. *U* 17.1657-1671). What accompanies the necessity of a substantial payment plan, finally, is the thought of possible "rapid but insecure means to opulence" that "might facilitate immediate purchase" of Bloom's Flowerville? (*U* 17.1672-73); it seems that an important part of the fantasy, in other words, is not just the ownership of the estate but the construction of schemes and scenarios that involve the rapid accumulation of wealth that could make its acquisition a reality. And Bloom's proposed schemes are often fascinating. The first involves an exploitation by means of telegraphy of the delay between Greenwich time and Dunsink (Dublin) time in order to lay bets in Ireland on horse races that had already ended in England; related ideas include attempting to "break the bank at Monte Carlo" by way of a "study of the laws of probability" (*U* 17.1695) or winning a million-pound award for squaring the circle ("a solution of the secular problem of the quadrature of the circle" [*U* 17.1696-97]).

But besides these gambling schemes and other such hopes for the quick accumulation of large amounts of money, the narrative asks whether "vast wealth [was] acquirable through industrial channels" (*U* 17.1698). Indeed there are, one avenue being:

> "The reclamation of dunams[114] of waste arenary[115] soil, proposed in the prospectus of Agendath Netaim[116], Bleibtreustrasse, Berlin W. 15, by the cultivation of orange plantations and melonfields and reafforestation. The utilization of waste paper, fells[117] of sewer rodents, human excrement possessing chemical properties, in view of the vast production of the first, vast number of the second, and immense quantity of the third, every normal human being of average vitality and appetite producing annually, cancelling byproducts of water, a sum total of 80 lbs. (mixed animal and vegetable diet), to be multiplied by 4,386,035, the total population of Ireland according to census returns of 1901" (*U* 17.1699-1708).

Refracted through the young Joyce's question about the nature of the artwork and its aesthetic ends (specifically the necessity Joyce recognized of finding a formal

[114] "A measure of land, used esp. in Israel, equal to 1000 sq. metres or about a quarter of an acre" (*OED*, "dunam," n.)
[115] "Of or belonging to sand or gravel" (obs.) (*OED*, "arenary," adj.). Etymologically related to "arena," from the Latin "harena" or sand.
[116] "Hebrew: 'a company of planters' …, an advertisement for a Zionist colony" or a model farm established in Palestine in 1905. Gifford, Don. *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's* Ulysses, revised ed. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1988. p. 74 (the annotation is for an earlier appearance of Agendath Netaim in the first Bloom episode, "Calypso." Cf. *U* 4.191-92.
[117] "The skin or hide of an animal" (*OED*, "fell", n.1)

differentiation between the matter of art and the matter produced by the body), as well as through the Lewisian image of *Ulysses* of the catastrophic outpouring of dead matter resulting from the digestion of the nineteenth century, this literal calculation and tallying of the amount of excrement produced in Dublin in the year 1901 – just under 351 million pounds, to be exact – forms a comic self-narration. Significantly, this narration culminates in the entry of matter into systems of circulation and exchange; as it moves from the sewer to the fertilized field, it becomes a commodity, gaining value in an economic system of goods, at the same time that it becomes a means for the production of yet more commodities, i.e., citrus fruits to be consumed and presumably recycled in similar fashion. This conversion of putatively sheer, dead matter into a means of self-reproduction and a value for a system of exchange (an economy) presents an idealization of the sort that I take to be significant for the aesthetic concerns of "Ithaca," and by extension *Ulysses*, as a whole. This is not because it's an imagined plan for accruing industrial wealth that unfolds only in Bloom's fantasy of a dream estate, and neither does it mean that the matter involved is rendered somehow unreal or made into a metaphysical shadow of mind or language. On the contrary, it is invested (both literally and figuratively) with a meaning or function that is not strictly reducible to, for example, its "chemical properties" (*U* 17.1703).[118] The fact that Bloom's imagination locates the orange and melon

[118] I should here note that while this analysis skirts the crucial analysis of the commodity and exchange-value to be found in Marx's *Capital Volume 1* et. passim. I am at this stage aiming at a broader point about how matter and its ostensible exemplars are represented, imagined, idealized, and ultimately destroyed in "Ithaca." Accordingly, the

plantation specifically in Palestine as part of a nationalist and capitalist effort to demonstrate the validity of a Zionist state[119] – that even the imagination of space and measurement demonstrates a local and historical form of measurement (the dunam, which is associated with Israel and before that the Ottoman Empire) is further evidence for the ideal nature of this investment.

Two important aspects of Bloom's fantasy of industrial wealth need to be emphasized with respect to this idealization. First, the transition from ordinary (though fantasized) object consciousness to the hypothetical point of view that grasps the city as a whole is a species of the "view from no one" that we have sought to describe and clarify. It makes Dublin over the course of a year – an object unavailable to the senses as such – the object of a disembodied memory that recollects in probabilistic form a year's worth of material flow out over 4 million distinct individuals and constructs out of that recollection an image that is both real and imagined at the same time. Second, Bloom's fantasy of the conjunction of matter and economy is decisively exposed to the possibility of absolute crisis. The sequence of fantasy about the country estate and the accumulation of wealth that is the condition of the latter's acquisition terminates with the narrator's question: "what eventuality

point I want to make about "idealization" is neither intended as an interpretation nor as a refutation of, say, the analysis of the commodity, the labor theory of value, and so on that Marx and his successors have carried out in stricter terms and in more rigorous fashion. In my argument, the transformation of human excrement into a commodity and its concomitant entry into a system of exchange and social valuation is only exemplary of a more general movement or oscillation between matter and its idealization.

[119] Cf. Gifford 73, 74.

would render [Bloom] independent of such wealth?" The only response here, despite the fact that it is surely possible to generate any number of scenarios in which Bloom loses his fortune (in parallel, that is, with the numerous proposed or fantasized scenarios for gaining it), invokes "the independent discovery of a goldseam of inexhaustible ore" (*U* 17.1752-53). With brutal simplicity, Bloom's dreamed economy is eradicated and the system of value and exchange is theoretically neutralized: in this instance we can see the incompleteness in the idealization imagined by Bloom and by Joyce.

The second example is one of the most widely-cited examples of the idiosyncratic narrative style and point of view found in "Ithaca." Shortly after Bloom and Stephen have returned to Bloom's house in the early hours of the morning (entering by Ulyssean "stratagem" [*U* 17.84]), the narrator first draws attention to the minutiae of sensation in a fashion that is by now familiar (e.g., "what discrete succession of images did Stephen … perceive?" [*U* 17.108]; "what did Bloom see on the range?" [*U* 17.157]), Bloom removes an iron kettle from the stovetop in order to fill it with water at the sink, in order to make cocoa for the pair. Once Bloom turns the faucet, the narrator interjects the question "did it flow?" [*U* 17.163]. The response to this seemingly undemanding question sets the tone for the subsequent proliferation of apparently minor details, especially since it is the first dramatic expansion of the purview of story matter on display in "Ithaca." No simple affirmative or negative response is forthcoming; rather, the narrator provides (in another disembodied view

of the city and its systems of circulation) a rigorously literal 234-word account of the journey of water from reservoir to tap which includes recent municipal efforts at water conservation in light of summer drought and the massive daily consumption needs of Dubliners:

> "Yes. From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of $5 per linear yard by way of the Dargle, Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles, and thence, through a system of relieving tanks, by a gradient of 250 feet to the city boundary at Eustace bridge, upper Leeson street, though from prolonged summer drought and daily supply of 12 ½ million gallons the water had fallen below the sill of the overflow weir…" (*U* 17.164-172).

We can observe here the same shift of register and perspective in the narration of the flow of water supply that we saw in the industrial fantasy of making human waste a self-sustaining means of profit: here it's in the narrator's constrast of the visible surfaces of bodies and objects in Bloom's kitchen, as focalized variously through Bloom and Stephen, and the unexpected rending of that visual surface in a subterranean and invisible system of flow and circulation.

Bloom, "waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier" (*U* 17.183) further idealizes (and we have to presume that this idealization is at least partially unconscious or tacit,

because it is not suggested that it is present in Bloom's awareness in the time of the story, that is, the time that it takes Bloom to fill the kettle with water from the sink; rather, it is presented in the eternal and impersonal present that the narrator of "Ithaca" so frequently employs) the materiality of water; an even more rigorously detailed presentation of the catalogue of qualities that Bloom admires in water. These qualities include but are by no means limited to

> "its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level: its vastness in the ocean of Mercator's projection:[120] its unplumbed profundity … the restlessness of its waves … the independence of its units … the variability of states of sea … its climatic and commercial significance … its preponderance of 3 to 1 over the dry land of the globe … its capacity to dissolve and hold in solution all soluble substances … its gradation of colours … its violence … its secrecy in springs and latent humidity … its healing virtues … its utility in canals, rivers … its submarine fauna and flora (anacoustic, photophobe)[121]…its ubiquity as constituting 90% of the human body," and so on (cf. *U* 17.185-228).

Bloom's idealization consists not in projecting imaginary or fictitious qualities of water *qua* sheer physical substance but in demonstrating its capacity to bear so many

[120] Mercator, of course, projected the three-dimensional globe onto the two-dimensional map. It would be tempting to see here a sort of geographical *ekphrasis* and yet another of the novel's self-images.
[121] Or deaf and blind, reflecting an incorrect but thematically interesting belief that the animal life at the bottom of the sea – "the abyssal plain" – is insensate.

proliferating articulations, the (physical, chemical, cultural, biological, and so on) networks that it enters into. One way of putting this is that it's not a matter of physical or metaphysical necessity that water cover the majority of the earth or especially that it's amenable to commercial, technological and labor practices (because of its "docility in working hydraulic millwheels turbines, dynamos, electric power stations, bleachworks, tanneries, scutchmills" [*U* 17.221-22] or its "utility in canals" [*U* 17.222]); Bloom's catalogue is a fragment of the sorts of functions water can perform, the forms it can take, the relations it enters into, the social intercourse it allows, and even the political symbolism ("democratic equality") that it supports. What is idealizing about Bloom's encyclopedic hydrophilia is not the at it gives the real qualities, relations, and determinations of aquatic matter the status of less-than-real idea. On the contrary, it submits the reality of water to knowledge, to penetration and manipulation either by concept or by technology. And "Ithaca" imagines the expansion of knowledge not as a violent act forced on material being, but instead as a renovation of the possibilities of narrative art at the latter's limit.

In the case of the citrus field fertilized by the waste of Dublin, idealization of dead matter was made incomplete by the thought of an economic disaster that would neutralize the material support of exchange value. It is also the case that "Ithaca" finds images – appropriately enough, because there is a sense these can *only* be figures – of the neutralization or elimination of knowledge. We have seen the projections of disembodied views from no one that support the narrative project of relentless and

rigorous expansion of knowledge, but this project is countersigned by the thought of the loss, destruction, or erasure of the subject of knowledge. Joyce famously wrote of "Ithaca" (in a widely cited letter to Frank Budgen) that the latter's form of mathematical catechism meant that "all events are resolved into their cosmic physical, psychical &c. equivalents … so that not only will the reader know everything and know it in the baldest coldest way, but Bloom and Stephen thereby become heavenly bodies, wanderers like the stars at which they gaze" (*JJ* 501). What Joyce left implicit in this compact formula is the extent to which the aim of "knowing everything" erases itself from within, encompassing as it does knowledge of its own self-destruction.

In fact, images of radical destruction are central to a certain Joycean conception of aesthetic form. We have already seen how there is a fundamental sense in which the thought of Dublin's erasure from the earth motivates the writing of *Ulysses*; when Joyce tells Budgen that he hopes for a picture of Dublin so complete that the city might be rebuilt using the novel as a blueprint, he binds the concept of realism to catastrophe, and unfolds in imagination the ultimate tragedy which licenses renewal and renovation through art. This reported remark to Budgen is not the first image of the relation between art and material destruction to be found in Joyce's imagination. In a very early (1900) essay that Joyce wrote while at University College Dublin, entitled "Drama and Life," Joyce wrote that "drama is … the least dependent of all arts on its material. If the supply of mouldable earth or stone gives out, sculpture becomes a memory, if the yield of vegetable pigment ceases, the pictorial art ceases.

But whether there be marble or paints, there is always the artstuff for drama" (*OCP* 26). Joyce's early characterization of the essential finitude of the plastic arts due to the possible exhaustion of their material forms a striking image, according to which the future of sculpture and painting depend in an essential way on the persistence of a material world, which future drama does not likewise share. It is impossible not to see this idea reflected in "Ithaca," in the imagination of the end of the novel. That such an imagination takes place in an episode that can likewise be situated at the formal and historical limits of the novel form (both Fredric Jameson and the eminent narratologist Monika Fludernik, for example, have suggested that it is essentially non-narrative) is no accident. This image of the end of the novel is, of course, also the end of the human species. The reminder of this end is prominent in "Ithaca." When Bloom and Stephen enter the back garden and observe the "heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" (*U* 17.1039), Bloom meditates on, among other things, "the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life" which "formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity" in the timescale of the cosmos (*U* 17.1054-56). But a yet more radical destruction is to be found in the passages which perform various comparisons of Bloom and Stephen, for example, their differential embodiments of artistic (Stephen) and scientific (Bloom) temperaments. The narrator here presents a comical/mathematical explanation of the "relation [that] existed between their ages"(*U* 17.446) that describes various mathematical operations that can be carried out on the difference and the ratio of Bloom's and Stephen's ages in years ("if the

proportion existing in 1883 had continued immutable, conceiving that to be possible, till then 1904 when Stephen was 22 Bloom would be 374 …" [*U* 17.452-54]). But in response to the question about what "might nullify" these circuitous (and, it must be noted, mathematically conceivable but physically impossible) calculations, the narrator offers the succinct answer: "the cessation of existence of both or either, the inauguration of a new era or calendar, the annihilation of the world and consequent extermination of the human species, inevitable but impredicatable" (*U* 17.462-65).

This image of apocalypse functions in (at least) two significant ways. That total knowledge encompasses knowledge of the destruction of knowing things invites metaphysical crisis. But it also precisely indexes the aesthetic labor that "Ithaca" carries out between matter and idea, knowledge and destruction, sensation and the insensible. It establishes the processes and limits of knowledge and idealization at a point where art appears as simultaneously impossible – because its materials are exhausted with the extinction of the species – and renewed, by making the void of this extinction material for an art (the novel) renovated at the limits of its fundamental technique (narrative). The final narrative question of "Ithaca," "where?" (*U* 17.2331) has no answer, only a blank expanse of page. Stephen has left the house, Bloom has finally gone to sleep with Molly; the silence of the empty page terminates the accumulation and proliferation of knowledge with unconscious, insensate, unvoiced dream or sleep. This blankness of the page is the true limit of narrative uncovered by the coordination of matter and its idealization in "Ithaca;" it binds that episode's

thought of the neutralization of knowledge in extinction to the novel's recognition of its own techniques for transforming matter. For this reason, if we are looking for a Joycean materialism or materiality, we shouldn't attempt to find it in the banal world of things, objects, and the cascade of bodily substance; instead, we should see in the empty page and the void it projects a materialism of nothingness, the thought of no thought. But if this is really a materialism, it is decisively not a philosophical doctrine to be found external to the ambivalent work of the text itself – the latter, when it encounters the "incertitude of the void" (*U* 17.1014-15), is ever ready to inscribe: *hic sunt leones*.

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