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Waxing Ornamental: Reading a Poetics of Excess in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire de maîtrise porte sur une poétique de l'excès dans *Orlando* de Virginia Woolf et *Nightwood* de Djuna Barnes comme une stratégie combattant la tendance qu'a le modernisme à dévaloriser l'écriture des femmes comme étant trop ornementale. J'expose comment Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, et Wyndham Lewis tentent de récupérer la notion du détail afin d'affirmer une poétique masculine. Je fais appel également aux oeuvres de l'architecte autrichien Adolf Loos qui souligne sa dénonciation de l'ornement comme régressif. Dans *Orlando* et *Nightwood*, je considère l'excès associé au corps. Je soutiens que, dans ces textes, les corps dépassent les limites de la représentation moderniste. Je considère aussi comment *Orlando* et *Nightwood* font apparaître la narration comme ornement et écrivent excessivement l'histoire et le temps. Pour conclure, je propose une façon de lire l'excès afin de reconceptualiser le potentiel de production de la signification dans des textes modernistes.

Mots-clés: modernisme, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, théorie féministe, théorie du genre, théorie queer, le grotesque, le corps, poétique

ABSTRACT

My thesis explores a poetics of excess in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* as a strategy through which the authors combat modernism's devaluation of women's writing for being overly ornamental, detailed, and/or artificial. I examine how the critical writings of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis attempt to reclaim the notion of detail for a masculine-oriented poetic project, and I look at how Austrian architect Adolf Loos's work condemns ornament as backward and regressive. In treating *Orlando* and *Nightwood* directly, I consider the novels' excessive and ornamental construction of bodies and how these bodies exceed the limits of existing modernist paradigms for representation. I also discuss narration as ornamentation in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* and how these novels excessively inscribe history and time. My conclusion proposes a practice of reading excess that rethinks this concept and its potential for producing meaning in modernist texts.

Keywords: modernism, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory, the grotesque, the body, poetics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
I. Introduction	1
II. “Dear Mr Joyce”: A Brief History in Letters.....	8
III. Nothing Superfluous: Detail, Ornament, and Modernism	14
Detail.....	15
Ornament.....	24
IV. Ornamental Bodies.....	33
V. Narration as Ornamentation	53
VI. Conclusion: Reading Excess.....	69
VII. Works Cited.....	72

To Little Grandma. I miss you.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Between November 1911 and February 1912, Ezra Pound published a twelve part essay titled “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” in twelve separate issues of *The New Age*. Part criticism, part prescription, and part translation, the essay expresses concerns about Western literature and its relevance to life in the modern world. In the essay, Pound calls for “a simplicity and directness of utterance” in poetry, claiming that “it is not until poetry lives again ‘close to the thing’ that it will be a vital part of contemporary life.” In the same stroke, he warns that “[a]s long as the poet...is content to say something ornate and approximate, just so long will serious people, intently alive, consider poetry...as a sort of embroidery for dilettantes and women.” He also stresses the need “to escape from rhetoric and frilled paper decoration” and argues that the “dignity” of poetic form “cannot be conferred by florid adjectives or elaborate hyperbole” (41).

Pound’s gender-coded language ties these statements together and works to reinforce a modernist hierarchy of values that correlates with a binary of gender difference. A pattern emerges in his vocabulary in which feminine-coded words like “ornate,” “embroidery,” “dilettante,” “frilled,” “decoration,” “florid,” and “elaborate”—which Pound uses in a derogatory sense—evoke notions of superfluousness, artificiality, and excess. In contrast, Pound considers concepts like “simplicity” or “directness” of language as universal and thus coded masculine or, at the very least, *un-* or *anti-*feminine. Inadvertently or not, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” advocates for an extraction or expulsion of the feminine in modernist literature in order to achieve greater precision in language, avoiding “approximation” and allowing poetry to live “close to the thing” (41). Through his rhetoric, Pound reveals a modernist anxiety about women entering the cultural space of literature. This anxiety, I argue, arises from a fear of various types of excess and, subsequently, a feminine mode of writing that is believed to embody such excess—writing that takes things a little “too far,” potentially disrupting frameworks for thinking about literature that are based in Western, male-dominated constructions of history, myth, and tradition.

Taking things too far, indulging in the details, embellishing for the sake of embellishment, and focusing on the margins rather than the center are all concepts that propel

my readings of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate how a poetics of excess in these two relatively well-known (and even canonical in their own right) modernist works comes into dialogue with modernist movements that advocate for greater efficiency, austerity, and precision of language in modernist writing. T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Adolf Loos, like Pound, also produce critical works in the modernist era that attack ornament and excess by associating them with a feminine essence that negatively influences the way that women, or other authors who tend toward the feminine, write. Reading their criticism with a focus on the discourse that forms around ornament and excessive detail reveals not only a desire to craft a hard, sculpted, clearly defined aesthetic but also an anxiety over what is seen as the encroachment of women on the masculine territory of modernist innovation and experimentation. In my readings of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, a poetics of excess foregrounds how these novels resist certain hegemonic impulses of this modernist territory, including constructions of modernist lineage or heritage, the privileging of masculine-oriented aesthetics, and the reification of sexual difference. As employed by Woolf and Barnes, a poetics of excess reframes and challenges these cultural currents, all of which are key to the formulation of modernist aesthetic and poetic values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mine is not the first study of modernist women's writing to use the term "poetics of excess." Karen Jackson Ford's *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade* defines excess as "a rhetorical strategy" in the works of various women writers, "adopted to overcome the prohibitions imposed by the application of a disabling concept of decorum" (13). Ford associates excess with a feminine mode of writing or a feminine strategy for the production of meaning. My readings of *Orlando* and *Nightwood* build upon this association. For Ford, the notion of "decorum" acts as a point of departure for conceptualizing a poetics of excess:

The idea of poetic excess developed in this book, however, is best understood in relation to literary decorum, an idea that has been relatively neglected in recent criticism. I choose decorum and excess as the two points of a theoretical compass because they best describe the circle that divides the poets in this study from the dominant literary culture that attempted to silence them, either by coercing them into an approved mode of writing or by excluding them altogether. (12)

Ford's overarching aim is to identify a trans-medium and cross-generational use of and attachment to excess that gives rise to an "indecorous" way of writing or expressing oneself. This "indecorousness" attempts to counter the kind of policing of women's bodies and actions that concepts like modesty, chastity, and reserve enact.

Similarly, my study of excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* aims to demonstrate how the critical perspectives of writers like Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and Loos reflect modern discourses on gender, sexuality, and pathology. I argue that in response to these critical perspectives, Woolf and Barnes employ a poetic strategy of excess and ornamentation in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* as a way of resisting the authority of modernism's paternal voices. My method resembles Ford's in that I develop an understanding of excess and ornamentation in the work of Woolf and Barnes as a response to the valorization of austerity, functionality, and objectivity in the writings of Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and Loos. In contrast to the masculine, universal notions of austerity or functionality, decorum is coded feminine, which is likely why Ford finds it so useful to conceptualize decorum as an antagonistic force against which excess writes. In what follows, I build upon Ford's work by considering seemingly ungendered inclinations toward a reduction in language, a brand of minimalist poetics, and the poetic practice of "pure" objectivity and impersonality in order to show how these inclinations are coded not only as masculine but also as *anti-feminine*. I then argue that Woolf and Barnes take up a modernist poetics of excess as a specifically feminine writing strategy which offers an alternative to these masculine poetic and aesthetic values.

Ford claims that the poets in her study "practiced their own unconventional mode, excessively intensifying its indecorous aspects in an act of self recovery and assertion against social negation" (13). My approach in this thesis emphasizes the intensification of detail and ornamentation in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* as a strategy that combats modernism's tendency to "negate" or devalue women's writing for being overly ornamental and detailed—in other words, without truth, detached from reality, and/or non-universal. Taken together, detail and ornamentation serve as the two principal theoretical components of my conceptualization of excess. For the element of detail, I draw heavily upon Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, in which Schor meticulously traces an archaeology of the detail in the Western imaginary. She establishes its history of associations with the feminine and the political ramifications of such associations, particularly with regard to aesthetic and cultural

values. Schor's research also provides a useful link between detail and ornamentation when she argues:

To focus on the detail and more particularly on the detail as negativity is to become aware, as I discovered, of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose "prosiness" is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women. (4)

My discussion of ornamentation, therefore, focuses on the misogynist undertones of modern ideas about the problems that ornamentation poses to the advancement of modern art, literature, culture, and civilization. The critical writings of Adolf Loos offer an obvious source for these kinds of ideas, which continue to develop in the self-consciously modernist writings of Pound and others. Austrian architect, cultural critic, and author of the well-known and controversial tract against ornamentation, "Ornament and Crime," Loos illustrates throughout his work that the denunciation of the ornamental, artificial, and/or excessive is not confined to a single craft or profession, a particular artistic or literary movement, or specific national or cultural boundaries. Rather, the emphasis on essence or functionality as aesthetically preferable to the ornamental or superficial pervades numerous professions, crafts, artistic and literary circles, and political movements from the turn of the century onward. Ultimately, the attempted exorcism of excessive detail, ornamentation, superfluosity, and other "unnecessary" poetic and narrative elements in modernist art and literature by the likes of Loos and Pound provokes a counter poetics of excess exemplified by *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. In these novels, Woolf and Barnes consciously employ excess as a means of inscribing alternative accounts of modernity that include the voices of women as well as other marginalized groups.

The specific temporal, spatial, and interpersonal configuration that I rely on for my exploration of excess in the works of Woolf and Barnes in relation to male moderns like Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis owes its existence and development to modernist scholars like Bonnie Kime Scott, Peter Nicholls, Lyn Pykett, Heather Love, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Lesley Higgins, Carolyn Allen, and many others. Scott, for example, identifies resonances among Woolf, Barnes, and Rebecca West and, as a critical strategy, groups these women under the

title of “The Women of 1928.” For Scott, 1928 marks “a year when Woolf, West, and Barnes were highly productive, having found strategies to succeed as professional writers and a degree of formal license,” as well as a point at which these women “had written their way out of some of their confining paternal, avuncular, and male modernist relationships and literary patterns” (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume I* xxxvii). Scott’s notion of a female counterpart to “the men of 1914” supports my comparison of a poetics of excess in the work of Woolf and Barnes with the various manifestations of a poetics of austerity or objectivity in the work of Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and Joyce. It also happens to coincide advantageously with the particular novels of Woolf and Barnes that I discuss in this thesis. Woolf’s *Orlando* was published in 1928, and, as Phillip Herring notes, Barnes began work on her early drafts of *Nightwood* about a year after the “great love” of her life, Thelma Wood, left her in 1928 (83, 156, 162-164). Thus, the modernist moment in history that I treat in this thesis owes much to modernist literary scholars and historians who, over the past few decades, have offered new perspectives on the numerous modernisms that emerged from this culturally and socially tumultuous period—modernisms that often relied on gender, sexuality, and race as vital components of their formal practice and literary identity.

In this thesis, my analysis of stylistic excess and ornamentation as a literary mode of resistance to modern discourses about the utility, functionality, and objectivity of language begins with the champions of these very discourses. Chapter one discusses the beginnings of the Poundian flavor of modernism in England at the turn of the twentieth century, with particular attention to some of the letters sent between “the men of 1914” throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. Having identified some degree of structure to the personal and professional relationships among these men, I dedicate the second chapter to discussing how the critical and theoretical writings of Pound, Eliot, and Lewis take up the issues of detail and ornamentation in art and literature and how these writings inform one another to such an extent that it is possible to derive from them a relatively cohesive and consistent discourse against excessive detail and ornamentation in modernist literature. I also bring Adolf Loos’s criticism of ornament and detail into dialogue with these modernist critics as a way of demonstrating the broad reach of such anti-ornamental sentiment throughout turn of the century Europe. In a specific section on ornament in this chapter, I introduce Woolf and Barnes to the discussion as a way to demonstrate how, in many ways, their uses of excess,

detail, and ornamentation write against the ideas of Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis. This also provides an appropriate transition into chapter three, in which I delve into the direct treatment of excess and ornamentation in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. More specifically, I look at the ways in which bodies within these texts are constructed as excessive and inherently ornamental. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque as a starting point, I explain how various bodies in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* exceed the potential for representation, thereby questioning existing modernist literary frameworks and techniques for such representation. Additionally, using Judith Butler's theories of performativity and resignification, I explore the ways in which the excessive and ornamental performativity of bodies in these novels works to resignify certain discursive terms, like decadent, degenerate, and regressive, which were leveled against marginal and pathologized groups in the modern era, including women, homosexuals, and Jews. In chapter four, I shift focus to formal aspects of Woolf's and Barnes's texts, arguing that elements like carefully crafted rhetoric, overdetermined metaphor, and mixing of genres offer their own brand of modernist experimentation and produce meaning in new ways. Finally, I end with a discussion of temporal excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, concentrating both on the way in which certain characters are positioned in relation to time and history as well as the ways in which time and history are narratively conceptualized by Woolf and Barnes.

Arriving at an understanding of excess and ornamentation as neither superfluous nor indulgent but rather as a way of reaching beyond the "thing itself" is one of the principal aims in this thesis. Woolf and Barnes challenge modernist poetic notions of objectivity and impersonality by exploring parts of the thing which are typically not thought of as *essential* to the thing—the "unnecessary" details, the periphery, the decorative, and so forth. However, these excesses, as evidenced by *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, serve as a pivotal means for understanding the greater context in which "things" exist—"things," of course, being any object of inquiry: cultural artifacts, bodies, historical events, scientific facts, etc. In the two novels I have chosen to examine, Woolf and Barnes urge readers to consider these things and objects not as discrete and isolated from their surroundings but as culturally, socially, and sexually entrenched in existing systems that do not just disappear with the "make it new" attitude of modernism. These novels demonstrate how women authors, in addition to other minority authors, do not possess the privilege of simply forgetting the past through an

immediate notion of the present and its “newness.” While the potential for forgetting is dangerous for marginalized groups, the process of remembering is also painful for the individual who chooses to write. Thus, Woolf and Barnes find themselves occupying the space of the in-between or the interstitial, negotiating the danger of forgetting and the pain of remembering. It is from this space, I will argue, that these authors write against masculine formulations of modernism, using detail and ornamentation as part of their primary poetic strategy. Ultimately, through developing these two elements within their narratives, Woolf and Barnes write a poetics of excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* that embraces the traditionally feminine-coding of detail, ornamentation, and excess as a way of writing against the masculine bias of high modernism.

II. “DEAR MR JOYCE”: A BRIEF HISTORY IN LETTERS

The letters sent between “the men of 1914”¹ in the years leading up to and during the First World War provide insight into the modernist history of exclusion that would shape the way in which the works of Woolf and Barnes were critically discussed during and after modernism’s peak years. In December 1913, Pound began a correspondence with James Joyce, writing to him on the recommendation of W.B. Yeats. In his first letter, Pound discusses the current publishing landscape for literary journals and offers himself as a possible agent for a number of these journals, including *The Egoist*, *Poetry*, and two unnamed American magazines. Aside from publishing logistics, Pound also makes a peculiar remark about *The Egoist*’s former name of *The New Freewoman*:

... (“The Egoist” which has coursed under the unsuitable name of “The New Freewoman” ‘guere [sic] que d’hommes y collaborent’ as the *Mercure* remarked of it—and the “Cerebrilist” which means God knows what—anyhow they are about the only organs in England that stand and stand for free speech and want [*longhand*: (I don’t say get)] literature.) (*Pound/Joyce* 17-18)

While Pound’s comment about the *Cerebrilist*’s unusual name comes across as merely joking or sardonic, the line he cites from the *Mercure de France* indicates that the “unsuitability” of *The New Freewoman*’s title is specifically tied to issues of gender politics within a modernist publishing landscape. Jean-Michel Rabaté claims that the letter as a whole “reveals that Pound may have been slightly ironical about the magazine’s [*The Egoist*’s] gender politics...but not sanguinely opposed to its ideology” (107). While the language that Pound uses to comment on *The New Freewoman* in this letter is somewhat vague in this instance—thus, leading Rabaté to read Pound’s position as ironic rather than outright sexist—a letter that follows on January 4, 1914, is much clearer about the gender politics that will come to define many Anglo-American modernist movements, including those in which “the men of 1914” participate.

1. That is, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce. The first instance of this term appears in Wyndham Lewis’s *Blasting and Bombardiering*: “The men of 1914 were a ‘haughty and proud generation’, I quote Mr. Ford Madox Ford: the Joyces, the Pounds, the Eliots, my particular companions” (252).

In the January 4, 1914 letter, Pound continues to encourage Joyce to contribute work to *The Egoist*. With regard to the journal's purpose, Pound states, "We want it to be a place where a man can speak out" (*Pound/Joyce* 19). This sentence crystallizes one of the most basic sentiments of Pound's modernist project, and the desire that it expresses can be understood as encapsulating the goals of "the men of 1914" and their construction of what we continue to refer to as "high modernism." Pound and those in his closest circle recognized that the production as well as the consumption of art had clearly been altered by the advent of the modern era—that creating the "place" in which one could "speak out" had become just as important as creating the "man" who was to do the speaking. And there can be no mistaking here that Pound meant "man" not in the generic sense of mankind but in the specific sense of the male, the masculine, the non-female. This form of exclusionary politics would form a foundation not only for "the men of 1914" but also for the development of various critical perspectives with which this group approached art and literature as the dominant voices of Anglo-American modernism.

As he continued his correspondence with Joyce in hopes of helping him publish his work, Pound published an article in 1914 titled "'Dubliners' and Mr James Joyce." This work serves as an example of how the critical perspectives hinted at in the previously discussed letters begin to take shape in actual published criticism. In the article, Pound praises *Dubliners* for its "clear and hard prose," which is "free from sloppiness," avoids "softness," "does not sentimentalise," "gives us things as they are," and excludes "all unnecessary detail" (399-401). Pound echoes Adolf Loos's discourse on ornament and its association with cultural degeneracy, to which I will return in the following chapter. Pound is also building upon his own critical work from prior years and continuing to employ a gender-coded vocabulary in his critical discussions and evaluations of modernist works. Not only was this kind of critical language present in the "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" series of articles mentioned in my introduction, but it was also, I argue, central to Pound's formulation of a new modernist poetics, starting with the Imagist movement. In fact, the content of Pound's Imagist manifesto, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," draws on and, in many ways, sustains a clear, hard, sculpted,

austere, and objective poetics.² As early as the late nineteenth century, with critics like Adolf Loos, this style of aesthetics and poetics begins developing a distinctly modernist character, which ultimately belies (or perhaps contributes to?) its sexist rhetoric and gender coded language.

Peter Nicholls notes that none of the four “men of 1914” was born in England, and this is perhaps why their work shares a certain “sensitiv[ity] to questions of exile and cultural displacement,” ultimately leading them to embrace “models of psychic order which reinstate the divide between art and life, frequently in terms of a parallel re-fixing of sexual difference” (163-64). Nicholls’s juxtaposition of the issues of “exile and cultural displacement” with the “re-fixing of sexual difference” helps to illustrate one of the ways in which this central stream of Anglo-American modernism is, at its core, an exclusionary movement that aims to strengthen the cultural, intellectual, and social identity of the Western white male at the expense of the non-Western, non-white, and non-male. Maintaining focus here on the latter category, women represent a sort of invading or distracting force for the goals of this brand of Anglo-American modernism. An early letter of Eliot’s to his father summarizes this anxiety about women:

Most of my spare time after lectures goes in to the *Egoist* editing. It is a good practice editing a small paper, but very difficult under present conditions, when

2. H.D.’s relationship with Pound and connection to Imagism complicates the notion that masculinity and sexism were inherent to the formation of Imagist poetics. While the range of issues at play in H.D.’s participation in and abandonment of Imagism fall beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that Pound is only able to formulate a masculine Imagist poetics by ignoring or denying the existence of elements in H.D.’s poetry that do not conform to such a poetics. Peter Nicholls argues that in many of H.D.’s poems, the “emotional register differs from that of Pound and the other Imagists in part because H.D. does not excise the poetic ‘I’” (194). This refusal to rid her poetry of the personal or subjective opposes Imagism’s manifesto of objectivity. Nevertheless, H.D.’s poetry was key to the Imagist movement and highly regarded by Pound and other influential modernists. Thus, H.D. occupies an ambiguous space of belonging and unbelonging in the modernist milieu. In order to present her work as illustrative of Imagist principles, Pound highlights characteristics that appeal to his poetics—the direct presentation of objects, the use of sharp and precise language, the lack of elaborate rhetoric—and disregards those that do not—the insertion of the poetic “I,” the “expansion” and “elaboration” of detail, and the foregrounding of desire (194-195). This selective process parallels a modernist “regendering” of the concept of detail that I will discuss in chapter three.

there are so few people to write, and those mostly poor stuff. I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature, and also, once a woman has had anything printed in your paper, it is very difficult to make her see why you should not print everything she sends in.
(*The Letters of T.S. Eliot* 228-229)

While we might laugh this off as almost hysterically misogynist to the point of irrationality, Eliot is trying to mask his fear of women “taking over” the literary institution with a flippant comment about how much of a nuisance working with them can be. Additionally, as Eliot’s influence in literary publishing grows, this attitude toward women directly affects the decisions he makes. As he negotiated the creative and commercial details of what would become *The Criterion*, he wrote the following in a letter to Pound: “My own idea is that the way to make a review is to make it as unliterary as possible: there are only half a dozen men of letters (and no women) worth printing...” (776). This disregard for and exclusion of modernist women’s writing would continue for the better half of the twentieth century with such canon-establishing works as Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era* (1971).³

In some instances, the measures taken to prevent women from contributing to modernist movements, or at least to devalue the contributions they did make, wasted no time in criticizing or questioning the ability of women to produce valuable works. In these instances, the physical exclusion of women from the spaces in which decisions about publication and cultural positioning seemed a more favorable and efficient way to achieve the same goal. About a year after the publication of the first issue of *BLAST* in July 1914, Pound and Lewis began exchanging a series of letters that discussed the potential of the magazine. In one of Pound’s letters, he writes:

Cher L.

My invaluable helpmeet [Dorothy Pound] suggests that the Thursday dinners [to discuss *BLAST*] would maintain an higher intellectual altitude if

3. Joshua Kavaloski notes, “A glance at the index of Kenner’s book demonstrates its gender bias, since Woolf and Stein are mentioned in the massive volume only three and two times respectively. Joyce, Eliot, and Lewis each appear dozens of [sic] not hundreds of times” (101).

there were a complete & uncontaminated absence of women. She offers to contribute her own absence to that total & desirable effect.

Offer duly accepted.

yrs

E.P. (*Pound/Lewis* 12)

Aside, perhaps, from reminding Lewis of the weekly Thursday meetings regarding *BLAST*, this letter serves little other purpose than to give voice to Pound's misogyny and reveal his views on the role that women should play in the modernist enterprise. Assuming that Dorothy Pound did, in fact, make the suggestion that Pound claims she did, it is difficult to imagine her using the exact language presented in the letter. Or, giving Pound the benefit of the doubt, if Dorothy Pound did, in fact, "offer to contribute her own absence," one might read an edge of sarcasm in her voice that seemingly goes unnoticed by Pound. Regardless of the veracity of the anecdote, Pound's use of the word "uncontaminated" strikes as particularly venomous. It recalls Eliot's anxiety about publishing women: both he and Pound imply that there is something excessive about the feminine, that its influence will spread and dominate literature if not properly contained. On this note, in a separate letter from Eliot to Pound in which Eliot mentions an upcoming "special 'Henry James' issue of *Egoist*," Eliot writes:

Weaver is sending for James. Thursday — I thought too many women — it lowers the tone: not up to the Café Magry: perhaps there should be a special evening for males only, as well as this. Eeldrop on the feminisation of modern society. (*The Letters of T.S. Eliot* 221)

Again, the notion of a "feminisation of modern society" brings to mind a spreading disease—a disease Eliot intends to quarantine with events like "a special evening for males only." The pathological and medical connotations of this rhetoric will continue to play an important role as I discuss the aesthetic and poetic manifestations of this kind of misogyny in modernist criticism.

Nicholls touches upon one of the ways in which women potentially "contaminate" the clearly defined space of the male artist through his discussion of several different works by Pound, Eliot, Lewis and Joyce. Nicholls's argument identifies "desire" and its relation to the "artistic intelligence" as one of the driving forces for this notion of feminine contamination as understood by Pound, Eliot, and Lewis:

Sexuality construed as (original) desire rather than as simple appetitive need thus seems to threaten the self by opening the way to fantasies of identification whose unreality derives from a narcissistic suppression of otherness. That such fantasies are especially damaging to the artistic intelligence is a view expressed not only by Lewis, but also, in different ways, by Joyce, Pound and Eliot; indeed, the dilemma expressed here is right at the centre of this particular form of modernism. (184)

Nicholls goes on to use Joyce's characterization of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Pound's poetics in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* as evidence of this resistance against desire as a driving artistic force. Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and Joyce instead sought to develop a literary form that would provide "a kind of defense against the 'drift' of desire" (186). This stands in stark contrast to both Woolf's *Orlando* and Barnes's *Nightwood*, which rely heavily upon personalized, albeit often fragmentary and elusive, desire for their stylistic and thematic development. Desire and interpersonal relationships are complexly layered in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* and encourage readings that rely on the "drifting," unfixed nature of desire. Woolf, for example, hints at this fluid and indeterminate nature of desire in the character of Orlando, who simultaneously represents a writer struggling to find a voice and a queer individual experiencing the socially alienating effects of the surrounding heteronormative, patriarchal society. Yielding to or indulging in this desire—a desire to write one's experience, a desire to free oneself from the restriction of gender norms—is just one of many aspects that play a crucial role in the poetics of excess in the works of Woolf and Barnes that I will continue to discuss throughout this thesis.

III. NOTHING SUPERFLUOUS: DETAIL, ORNAMENT, AND MODERNISM

In an innocuously titled essay, “Chairs,” published in 1898, Adolf Loos claims, “Nothing in nature is superfluous, and it is the degree of functional value, when combined with the harmony of the other parts, that we call pure beauty” (63). In the Imagist manifesto “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” published in 1913, Pound writes, “Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something” (201). It may appear somewhat odd to bring these two works and their respective authors into dialogue with one another. For one, the two passages quoted were published fifteen years apart. Moreover, Loos is writing in Austria and primarily interested in architectural and design aesthetics, whereas Pound, an American expatriate living in England, is first and foremost a poet and literary critic. Yet, there is a resonance between the claims made in the two pieces that culminates in a single word: “superfluous.” For Pound, it seems necessary to iterate the interdiction against overdoing it, so to speak, in a straightforward and simple manner, while Loos’s logic takes a more subtle route to achieve essentially the same goal. If we look more closely at Loos’s argument, we find that, allowing for the glaring assumption that nature is by definition beautiful, he implies that the existence of the “superfluous” is a direct result of our inability to achieve the “degree of functional value” and “harmony” that one finds in nature. For Loos, the campaign against superfluousness, expressed in the title of his most famous and polemical essay, “Ornament and Crime,” is necessitated by an “unnatural” tendency toward “excess” in aesthetic tastes and production.

Obvious differences aside, Pound and Loos share a suspicion of and hostility toward detail and ornamentation—particularly *excessive* detail and ornamentation. Detail, ornamentation, and excess are inevitably intertwined with one another in the critical writings of Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis that I will be analyzing throughout this chapter. I will also begin to explore how certain modern discourses on science, medicine, and pathology implicate the body as a site where detail, ornament, and excess manifest as radical transgressive forces. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to all three of these concepts, at certain times using them interchangeably, while at others favoring one term over the other two. For the moment, however, I will discuss these concepts individually in order to establish relatively cohesive definitions for each. In doing so, I will be able to more easily identify intersections between

each of these three concepts and contextualize their development as aesthetic principles in relation to the broader spectrum of modernism.

DETAIL

Pound and Loos inherit the discourse on the superfluous that we find in their writings from a long history of thoughts and ideas on the subjects of detail and excess. As Naomi Schor discusses in *Reading in Detail*, the detail, which constitutes the primary structural unit of excess in literature and the visual arts, becomes a significant point of contention among writers, artists, and critics beginning in Greek and Roman Antiquity. One of Schor's important contributions to rethinking the detail is how she identifies the sexism and misogyny that have sustained studies of and arguments about detail throughout Western history:

The story of the rise of the detail is, of course, inseparable from the all too familiar story of the demise of classicism and the birth of realism, but it should not, indeed cannot be reduced to that story, for to retell the story from the perspective of the detail is inevitably to tell another story. To focus...on the place and function of the detail since the mid-eighteenth century is to become aware that the normative aesthetics elaborated and disseminated by the Academy and its members is not sexually neutral; it is an axiology carrying into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallogocentric cultural order. The detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine.

(4)

Schor opens her exploration and analysis of the notion of detail by positing its association with the feminine in the Western imaginary. Throughout her study, she continues to associate the modern discourse on detail most closely with the neo-classical era ("since the mid-eighteenth century"), which, she argues, reverberates with "the residues of the rhetorical imaginary, a sexist imaginary" (45). Furthermore, she claims that "the equation of an excess of details and decadence is an essential tenet of neo-classical doxa" (43), a tenet that proves equally important to many modernist writers and critics, including Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis.

Shifting to the mid- to late nineteenth century, Schor locates the sexist imaginary that

encapsulates the detail in the aesthetic writings of Loos and the French writer, critic, and photographer Francis Wey. For Wey as well as Pound, Eliot, and Lewis, the literary significance of the detail is tied up in the tradition of literary realism. The authors most often cited by these critics are Balzac and Flaubert, the former as an example of a writer who uses detail poorly and the latter as an example of a writer who uses detail well. Schor examines Wey's aversion to Balzac's use of detail, concluding that Wey's primary critique is concerned with the gravitation of Balzac's detail toward decadence: "Balzac's decadence consists then in the extenuation and extrapolation to which he subjects detail in his texts. Realism...turns out to be an avatar of the baroque, the school of the studied detail par excellence" (47). The underlying argument here is that such an "extenuation and extrapolation" of detail leads to decay within the text: the paragraph's decay into its constituent sentences, the sentence's decay into its constituent words, and, finally, the possibility of the word's decay into no more than its isolated meaning or, even worse, the isolated sounds of its constituent letters. The potential for such a collapse in meaning demands, in Wey's view, a reassessment of the detail, particularly a greater focus on "the nature of the relationship" between or among details rather than on the detail in isolation (46).

Returning again to the modernist era, Pound takes a different stance on the use of detail, loading his rhetoric and language with traces of the sexist imaginary that Schor identifies in her work. In "A Retrospect," Pound reiterates three poetic principles that he, H.D., and Richard Aldington "agreed upon" in "the early spring or early summer of 1912." One of these principles counsels: "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (3). On the same page, Pound notes that of the three principles, this one seems to have proven the most difficult to follow for poets claiming to be a part of the Imagist movement. He adds, "Indeed *vers libre* has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the

flaccid varieties that preceded it” (3).⁴ In his approach to detail, then, Pound neither despises detail outright nor takes up Wey’s cause for reorienting poetic focus to the more metaphysical relationship between one or more details. Rather, Pound despises the unnecessary or superfluous detail. Therefore, one way to understand Pound’s poetics—and, by proxy, the poetics of high modernism—is first to understand what constitutes “unnecessary” detail. Ultimately, this process of determining necessity is inextricably tied to notions of sexual difference in which the masculine modern takes precedence over the feminine.

As a way of reinforcing this gender hierarchy of values, the “men of 1914” attempt to reclaim the detail from what they perceive as the decadence and pervasive femininity of Western culture and the arts at the turn of the century. Schor explores this notion of “regendering the detail” in relation to the work of Roland Barthes. While the context with which she is working may be different, the question she poses is relevant to the state of the detail in early twentieth century cultural discourse:

Or has the detail achieved its new prestige by being taken over by the masculine, triumphing at the very moment when it ceases to be associated with the feminine, or ceasing to be connoted as feminine at the very moment when it is taken up by the male-dominated cultural establishment? (6)

This process of taking over or appropriating the detail constitutes one of the important cultural and aesthetic objectives of “the men of 1914” as well as continental critics like Loos. In what follows, I point to a discourse or rhetoric of the detail in the writings of Pound, Eliot, and Lewis that seeks to reclaim or revive it within a masculine-oriented poetic and aesthetic

4. This sentiment eventually plays an even stronger role in the aggressive aesthetic of Pound and Lewis’s Vorticism. The design of the movement’s magazine, *BLAST*, eschews softness, fluidity, and verbosity, favoring hard angles, sharp lines, and bold text. The satirical manifestos contained within the first issue of *BLAST* take the call for austerity and reduction in language to a more extreme cultural, social, and political level with their call to “blast,” “curse,” and/or “bless” various concepts. While the manifestos are mostly nonsensical and follow no consistent pattern in their blasting, cursing, and blessing, there are some exceptions. In “Long Live the Vortex,” which directly precedes the two manifestos, Lewis attacks sentimentality and romanticism as opposed to the “Reality of the Present” (*BLAST* 7), and the two Vorticist manifestos repeatedly blast or curse these specific concepts as excessive, distracting, or detrimental to future of modernist art and literature in England.

tradition. In doing so, I locate a hegemonic articulation of Anglo-American modernism against which I will later position a poetics of excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*.

Although a relatively fleeting movement, Imagism serves as a springboard for exploring the notion of detail in the works of Pound, Lewis, and Eliot for two reasons. First, Imagism posits a method of transposing a set of aesthetic principles into a strictly literary medium—that is, Imagism’s followers advance a poetics that attempts to render the visual in language. In many ways, I am attempting a similar translation of the visual elements of excess (detail and ornament) into a poetics that I identify in the thematic and formal construction of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. Understanding and explaining how Pound (and, to a lesser extent, Lewis and Eliot) crafts a modernist poetics via a visual schematic is an exercise in understanding how the same can be done with the novels of Woolf and Barnes. Second, Imagist criticism explicitly marks the detail as a contested formal and stylistic element that is vital to the development of modern poetry. Detail lies at the foundation of Pound’s discussion of the “Image” and alters the way he conceptualizes its transcription in poetic form. Although Imagism finds itself all but abandoned by the end of the First World War, its effects are felt in its critical legacy around the role that detail plays, or should play, in verse and prose.

In the same manifesto in which he condemns the superfluous, Pound defines an “Image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (“A Few Don’ts” 200). In line with this definition, fellow Imagist poet F.S. Flint lists the following as the first of the three “rules” upon which practitioners of Imagism agreed: “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective” (199). From this rule, one gleans that the objective treatment of a discrete entity is a principal aspect of Imagist poetics. Whether an “instant of time” or “the ‘thing’ itself,” Imagist poetics as defined by Pound and Flint asserts that there is some-*thing* outside of or beyond the poet to which he or she focuses attention in an effort to inscribe this thing as an Image within the poem. Within the process, form becomes of utmost concern to the Imagists as well as “the men of 1914.” Nicholls argues that these poets advocate “precision, refusal of sentimentality and rhetoric, [and] the visual image” while ignoring, for the most part, “the political entailments” and implications of these supposedly overarching Western artistic and cultural values (193). In a discussion of Schopenhauer’s view “of what art accomplishes,” Lewis reinforces the notion of the poet’s self-inflicted distance from the isolated poetic object: “That might be a splendid description of

what the great work of plastic art achieves. It ‘pauses at this particular thing’...‘The course of time stops.’ A sort of immortality descends upon these objects” (“Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art” 30). Furthermore, Lewis states that the mind of the artist experiences a certain “coldness” of “self-isolation” and that “[w]here the isolation occurs, of subject or object, outside or inside the vortex, is the same thing.” Lewis contrasts this view of the isolated, immortal object of art with “a Bergsonian impressionism, which would urge you to leave the object in its vital milieu” and which offers “its interpenetrations, its tragic literalness, its wavy contours, its fashionable fuss” (31). The language Lewis employs here is not unlike Pound’s repeated use of feminine-coded adjectives like “frilled,” “decorative,” and “soft.” While the term “fashionable fuss” is a jab at the popularization or democratization of fine art, “interpenetrations” and “wavy contours” indicate a lack of definition or precision—the antithesis of Pound’s hard, sculpted poetics. All three criticisms make use of a feminine-coded vocabulary, and by suggesting a certain fluidity or transitoriness, they anticipate, in some ways, the “‘fluid’ character” that Luce Irigaray reclaims and champions in her theorization of *écriture féminine*: “Fluid—like that other, inside/outside of philosophical discourse—is, by nature, unstable” (112). Of course, the “fluid,” the “other,” and the “unstable” threaten Lewis’s aesthetics of objectivity, thus requiring him to frame them as detrimental to the development and progression of modern art and literature.

Where, then, does the detail figure into the construction of the Image and how does the gendering or regendering of this detail establish for the moderns a division between the good and bad use of detail in literature? In 1911, Pound contributed “A Rather Dull Introduction” as the first part to “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.” In this introduction, Pound coins what he calls “the method of Luminous Detail,” which establishes a certain hierarchy of details in art and literature, at the top of which sits the “luminous detail” (21). For Pound, “luminous details” provide one with a certain contextual illumination of historical and cultural events—they “give one a sudden insight into circumjacent conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law” (22). Although he dedicates his introduction to the example of historical luminous details, the second part of the series, “A Beginning,” begins to explore the literary applications of the method of luminous detail: “In the study of the art of letters these points [luminous details] are particular works or the works of particular authors” (24). In the same manner in which Pound argues that historical luminous details draw together contextual facts

or point toward a core that produces an “intelligence of the period” (22), he claims that particular works and particular authors have the potential to define the literary mode of their respective periods in a generalized sense. Perhaps not so unintentionally, Pound, through this brief series of articles, anticipates the consecration of his own works—and, by association, those of Eliot, Joyce, Lewis, and others—as luminous details of the modernist period.

In considering the discourse of detail and its relation to the feminine, the most problematic aspect of Pound’s method is the way in which it seeks to universalize (masculinize) the particular. The masculine-oriented poetics of Imagism feature prominently in many of the later parts of “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” in which Pound explores how various individual components of syntax within a poem form something analogous, in microcosmic form, to the numerous luminous details within the whole of Western culture and history. Imagining words as “great hollow cones of steel of different dullness and acuteness,” Pound argues that “three or four words in exact juxtaposition are capable of radiating” a “peculiar energy” that contains “the power of tradition, of centuries of race consciousness, of agreement, of association” (34). Despite the call for rupture, newness, and experimentation, for Pound and “the men of 1914,” cultural lineage and the thread of “tradition” remain crucial not only to modern culture and literary practice in general but also to the poetic and aesthetic use of detail. The luminous detail should resonate with “tradition” and illuminate “race consciousness.” Pound essentializes race, implying that there exists a knowledge or awareness of the world that is distinctly European and has been transmitted, beginning in Classical Antiquity, throughout generations of the European “race.” Eliot takes up this notion when he writes:

...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 49)

Pound echoes this idea in his review of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Situating Joyce in the realist tradition of Flaubert and Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, Pound claims that Joyce “is quite capable of dealing with things about him, and dealing directly, yet these details do not engross him, he is capable of getting at the universal element beneath them.” Furthermore, he adds, “Good writing, good presentation can be specifically local, but it must not depend on

locality” (“Dubliners” 401). The luminous detail reaches for this “universal element,” a truth or intelligence that allegedly transcends the specificity or particularity of that detail. Additionally, it often effaces a level of subjectivity or local context that would inflect or alter the meaning of that detail.

Although Pound appears to be the initiator of this rebranding of the detail as something that could potentially illuminate the universality of a text, Lewis and Eliot partake in their own method of reinventing or resuscitating the detail to serve a hegemonic modernist project. Again invoking Joyce as one who properly employs detail in prose, Lewis reinforces an aesthetic that is clearly masculinist at its core. In an essay dedicated primarily to criticizing Virginia Woolf, Lewis dismisses a scene in *Mrs Dalloway* as “a sort of undergraduate imitation” of a similar scene in *Ulysses*, claiming that “local exponents” of the stream of consciousness technique—which he calls “a feminine phenomenon”—lack “the realistic vigour of Mr. Joyce” (“Virginia Woolf” 168). As evidenced by the subtitle of his essay, “‘Mind’ and ‘Matter’ on the Plane of a Literary Controversy,” Lewis is gesturing toward a struggle against subjectivity, personality, identification, and interiority that all “the men of 1914” wage in their writing. Lewis’s criticism of *Mrs Dalloway*’s stream of consciousness technique takes issue largely with the way in which this technique seeks out and hides in “the security of the private mind,” overly concerns itself with “the half-lighted places of the mind,” and, as he claims of Lytton Strachey’s work, “peep[s] more into the past than into the present” (169).

The details of stream of consciousness are, for Lewis as well as Pound and Eliot, excessive, unnecessary, and decidedly feminine. They see in these details an indulgence in the material minutiae of modern life that results in a withdrawal into the mind. Additionally, they seem to condemn the way in which stream of consciousness tends to position the physical, unordered, chaotic, and often purposeless details that surround one at any given moment as parallel to the infinitely chaotic structure of the mind. Woolf, on the other hand, argues for the importance of such details for the way in which they reveal what little attention history has afforded the lives of women and the day to day circumstances in which they find themselves. In “Women and Fiction,” she focuses on the social conditions which shaped women’s writing, or the lack thereof, throughout history:

Thus, if we wish to know why at any particular time women did this or that,

why they wrote nothing, why on the other hand they wrote masterpieces, it is extremely difficult to tell...The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life...it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer. (179-180)

For Woolf, this kind of attention to detail is not a superfluous or tangential exercise; rather, it is central to the reconstruction or reimagining of a women's history that not only accounts for those few thinkers whose names made it into the books but also those who lived as "ordinary women," navigating and surviving within a violent and precarious social landscape. Heather Love notes that "feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, resentment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness...are tied to the experience of social exclusion" (4), and the "experience of social exclusion" plays a significant role in the proliferation and excess of details in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. Both authors infuse their texts with details that evoke the negative feelings that Love describes—feelings grounded in experiences of loss and isolation. The inclusion of such details in women's writing works to reinvent or retell history in the hopes of, as Woolf puts it, "alter[ing] the established values" ("Women and Fiction" 182). It must be noted, however, that Woolf views the attention to detail and writing the quotidian as strategies that will ultimately guide women to "look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve." She argues that this progression will result in women writing "fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history" (183). For Woolf, women writing poetry, criticism, and history signifies an independence from existing paradigms of thought, as women will eventually develop their own poetic forms, critical frameworks, and historical methodologies that no longer rely on phallogocentric ways of thinking about the world and subjective experience. Still, she acknowledges that acute attention to the details of women's lives is a necessary step in achieving this goal.

This use or view of detail is not only incompatible with Pound's luminous detail and Lewis's praise of Joyce's "realistic vigour" in the details of *Ulysses*, but it also challenges Eliot's poetics of impersonality and unsettles his stance on the role that detail should play in modernist writing. Eliot's emphasis on the poet's distance from the object of poetry itself,

whether this object be an emotion, feeling, event, or experience, resonates with Pound's notion of the discrete Image suspended in time and space. However, Eliot focuses more of his attention on the poet and the poet's mind as "a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 55). While details—"numberless feelings, phrases, images"—play a role in Eliot's theory of impersonality, they are only important insofar as they are able to combine together to form a whole—"a new compound." The details, thus, are not valuable on their own—their combination is what Eliot finds desirable in poetry. In his view, the true poet can only accomplish the combination of these "particles" through "a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways." Furthermore, "Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (56). A certain distance between the poet and the poem is key to both of these arguments. For Eliot, the poet is not to express emotion or describe experience through a subjective personality. Instead, the poet is to act as a conduit ("medium") through which the chaotic details of emotion and experience are reconfigured and combined into a universal expression that transcends the particularities of the poet's life. Monika Faltejskova draws attention to the negative implications of this theory of impersonality for the work of modernist women writers:

Such aesthetic of impersonalisation...undervalues women's writing for it is opposed both to the personal, lyrical and confessional language female modernists often use as well as the frequently used genre of diaries and autobiographical forms of writing. (17)

Orlando and *Nightwood*, despite their continued status as highly respected and clearly modernist works of literature, are intensely personal novels that employ lyrical language, engage in confession, and contain many pseudo-autobiographical elements (while its subtitle is often dropped or omitted, the full title of Woolf's *Orlando* is *Orlando: A Biography*). I have already discussed some of the complexly personal aspects of both novels, and chapters three and four will return to the role that subjectivity, personality, and desire play in the development of a poetics of excess in these texts.

Alongside Pound's and Lewis's own condemnation of "frilled paper decoration," "florid adjectives," and "the personal and subjective" method, based both implicitly and explicitly on their association of these elements with the "feminine mind" (Pound, "I gather the Limbs of Osiris" 41; Lewis, "Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art" 33; Lewis, "Virginia Woolf" 170), Eliot's poetics of impersonality aims to extract the author's personality from the work of art or literature without considering the gendered, classed, and/or raced particularities of these extracted and foreclosed personalities. Eliot's poetics of impersonality directly opposes a poetics of excess in that it attempts either to suppress unwieldy details that do not fit within the order of tradition or to efface specificity or particularity by subsuming all details into this greater order of tradition. To cite Bonnie Kime Scott's useful metaphor, the notion of "tradition" for Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Lewis operates as "scaffolding" that "evokes architectonic male modernist designs" (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume 1* xxiv). This structure assembles details into a cohesive and historically continuous whole, eventually providing a foundation for the development of, for example, "[Hugh] Kenner's technological, international, monumental modernism" in the 1970s (81). Whether we take Pound's Image or luminous detail, Joyce's brand of realism that constructs a universality out of details, Lewis's privileging of the objective detail, or Eliot's depersonalization of the details that comprise poetry, we find a preoccupation with taming or mastering the detail for a hard, sculpted, slush-free modernist aesthetics and poetics that—as Pound claims of Daniel Arnaud—drives "at the centre of the thing" and "lives again 'close to the thing'" ("I gather the Limbs of Osiris" 41, 43). Yet, if the details of *Orlando* and *Nightwood* do not seem to drive at the "centre of the thing," it is because both novels are predicated upon loss, transformation, ambiguity, and ambivalence. In other words, how is one to treat the "thing itself" if the thing itself does not actually exist in the first place?

ORNAMENT

As much as Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Lewis were concerned with the fate of the detail in general terms—whether it be a descriptive detail in narrative, the detailed ordering of words in a line of poetry, or the detail of physical texture in a brushstroke—they and other modernist writers and critics also contributed to a discourse on a particular type, use, or arrangement of

detail: ornamentation. The concept of ornamentation acts as a bridge between detail in its generic form and the notion of excess. In fact, one might think of ornamentation as either excess of detail—as in the deliberate and excessive accumulation of details for decorative purposes (e.g. Baroque or Rococo motifs)—or excessive details—as in the inclusion of superfluous, purposeless, inconsequential, or unnecessary details (e.g. Barnes’s description of the apartment shared by Robin Vote and Nora Flood with all of their various material possessions). Of course, these two classifications of ornamentation are, more often than not, overlapping. Excessive details almost always contribute to excess of detail and vice versa. What is most important here is that the notion of ornament is coupled with the notion of excess and that both are thematically and stylistically intertwined throughout *Orlando* and *Nightwood*.

In this section, I will begin by briefly defining ornamentation in a purely visual sense and then discuss how this definition can be transposed into a literary form. This is critical to the development of my approach to textual ornamentation, for, whereas detail might refer to any individual peculiarity of a greater whole in art, literature, history, science, or everyday experience, ornamentation is first and foremost a visual and material phenomenon and has no obvious textual counterpart. Having established this method of identifying textual ornamentation, I will proceed with an analysis of modern discourse on ornamentation and how this discourse strongly associates ornamentation with femininity, degeneracy, and pathology. In doing so, I demonstrate how a modern hostility toward ornamentation, shared by Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis, is grounded in misogynist ideology, as evidenced in the language these writers use to express their rejection of ornamentation. As a means of challenging this misogynist ideology and inscribing alternatives to hegemonic modernist histories, timelines, and traditions, Woolf and Barnes employ a deliberate strategy of textual ornamentation and excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. In the final chapters of this thesis, I will explore more thoroughly how these works engage, question, and reframe common elements of modernist orthodoxy, including the displacement of faith and fantasy with science and reason, the championing of impersonality, and the economy of literary representation accompanying the culmination of the machine age.

From a purely visual standpoint, James Trilling defines ornamentation as “the elaboration of functionally complete objects for the sake of visual pleasure” (6). If one bases

the notion of completeness on an object's achievement of functionality, then ornamentation, from the outset, resists or transgresses the very possibility of a complete "thing." Indeed, ornamentation seems to be wholly incompatible with the previously discussed conceptual understandings of "the 'thing' itself" posed by "the men of 1914": Pound's Image, Lewis's object, and Eliot's impersonal configuration of poetic elements. Ornamentation takes the isolated, discrete "thing"—which, for Pound, Eliot, and Lewis, is functionally sufficient in and of itself—and detracts from its completeness by paradoxically adding some non-functional element. Furthermore, the non-functional aspect of ornamentation often signifies meaning that extends beyond the inherent meaning of the very object that it ornaments.

In an essay titled "Ladies' Fashions," Loos argues that the ornamental nature of women's fashion throughout Western history has less to do with either women or men deriving true aesthetic pleasure from this type of dress and more to do with women appealing to "man's sensuality...that perverted sensuality of his, for which only the culture of the times can be held responsible" (107). Ornament serves, for Loos and others, as a cultural barometer, indicating, at the turn of the century, a so-called perversion, degeneration, or decline in Western cultural values. This is ultimately associated with what Lewis calls, referring to Woolf, "the part that the feminine mind has played...in the erection of our present criteria," a criteria defined by "the values of decay" ("Virginia Woolf" 170). During this time period, various related terms like degenerate, decadent, perverted, inverted, diseased, pathological, regressive, backward, and nonmodern became interchangeable with the feminine. Thus, as Faltejskova argues, the developing association of the feminine with notions of cultural decline contributed to "a pervasive anxiety that culture needed saving from its alleged contaminating feminisation, and that literature needed rescuing from its 'feminine' invasion" (21). Woolf and Barnes, each in her own manner, enact a "feminine invasion" in their works through the use of excessive and ornamental language.

Before I begin my close readings of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, however, it is necessary to elucidate a method of transposing the purely aesthetic concept of ornamentation to a literary context. To begin, if one extends Trilling's definition of ornamentation to the realm of the literary, one must consider texts as "objects" themselves and, in doing so, entertain the hypothetical notion that there might exist a "functionally complete" text. Textual ornamentation, therefore, would almost always violate Pound's interdiction against the

superfluous. One way of understanding ornament, however, is through the way in which it denies the very possibility of functional form by its mere existence. In “Integrity and Ornament,” Jan Zwicky claims:

A form may be determined in great detail by the function to which it will be put. But such detail is not ornament as long as it subserves function. Ornament is a structural concept: as structural accident, it opposes structural essence.
(205)

Zwicky seems to suggest that the unnecessaryness of ornament to the functionality of a given form subverts the notion of “structural essence.” This notion of structural essence is inherent to Pound’s conceptualization of the Image or the “thing itself.” When Pound writes, “Use either no ornament or good ornament,” he is attempting to redeem the use of ornament—similar to his regendering of the detail—as a poetic element that can, in fact, constitute the essence of the “thing itself” (“A Retrospect” 5). I will ultimately show that the use of ornament in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* subverts Pound’s essentialist leanings by celebrating what Pound would consider to be “bad ornament”—intentionally artificial ornament, ornament that draws one’s attention toward the periphery, asking readers to question and challenge the authority of the alleged center.

In various ways, each of “the men of 1914” struggles with getting to the core or essence of the thing through a process of eliminating in language what is unnecessary about that thing. These writers often evoke the concept of ornamentation when discussing the unnecessary or superfluous in language, thus gendering these terms feminine. Discussing the future of poetry in the twentieth century, Pound writes:

As to Twentieth century poetry...it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls ‘nearer the bone’. It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth...I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither. (“A Retrospect” 13)

Here, the positive qualities that Pound equates with the development of modern poetry are gendered male and privilege an aesthetics of sparsity or austerity: hard, sane (not hysterical), “like granite,” austere, direct, and unemotional or unsentimental. On the contrary, the negative

qualities that Pound identifies are clearly gendered female and gesture toward the ornamental or a poetics of excess: rhetorical, perhaps more democratic (“luxurious riot”), and filled with “painted adjectives.” The aesthetic binary that Pound constructs in this brief passage demonstrates the role that another characteristic of ornamentation, that of artifice, plays in the rejection of the feminine as somehow inherently obscuring the truth, core, or essence of the poetic object.

In *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, Woolf and Barnes employ artifice as a means of undermining modern discourses that emphasize the importance of an essence or truth to language, gender, sexuality, nationality, race, and so forth. *Orlando*, for instance, stresses the artifice of gender in its main character as well as several minor characters, including Orlando’s admirer the Archduchess Harriet/Archduke Harry and her husband at the end of the novel, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. *Nightwood*, on the other hand, inscribes artifice as a way of parodying certain medical discourses and ironizing notions of noble/racial European lineage, namely in Felix Volkbein’s failed search for such lineage as a means of masking his Jewishness. Ornament is inherently artificial, and rhetoric acts as one of the principal modes of such artificiality in literary works, therefore establishing an alignment of the ornamental, the artificial, the rhetorical, the superfluous, and the feminine. In Schor’s reading of Wey, she notes this alignment of ornate rhetoric with the feminine: “Wey does nothing more than reinscribe a venerable metaphoric equating rhetorical ornaments with the artifices of painted women: an ornamental style is an effeminate style” (44). If modernist aesthetics and poetics were not governed by a reliance on sexual difference as an ideological construct from which value judgments issue, perhaps the notion of an “effeminate style” would not be such a negative thing. However, as I have shown through the critical writings of Loos, Pound, Eliot, and Lewis, the conflation of the feminine and the ornamental through the use of gender-coded language reveals a misogynistic and explicit privileging of the masculine over the feminine that is broad-reaching in modernist circles. In the next two chapters, I will return to this idea as I explore the possibility of reclaiming the feminine and ornamental as politically and socially positive and productive stylistic elements, largely through Judith Butler’s theory of resignification.

As discussed thus far, detail and ornamentation face a great deal of opposition: Pound’s “regendering” of the detail as an element that universalizes (masculinizes) the particulars of a

work, Lewis's rejection of the personal and subjective mode of detail in favor of a purely objective detail achieved through distance, Eliot's depersonalization of detail, and Loos's conflation of ornamentation with the feminine and cultural decay. Why, then, would Woolf and Barnes embrace and employ such derided elements as central to the poetics of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*? While opting for an excessively detailed and ornamental style would achieve the association of these works with a distinctly and unashamedly feminine mode of writing, there is perhaps another purpose to this formal strategy. Contrary to their male modernist counterparts, Woolf and Barnes are hyperaware of the way in which their formal and stylistic choices implicate the challenges that women and other marginalized groups face on political, social, sexual, and psychic levels. Therefore, these authors choose to detail and ornament their texts in such a way that ironizes these elements, politicizes literary form, and reorients the reader's attention to the way in which excess is not a form based on superfluousness but, rather, a form based on an insufficiency or lack—elements which suggest unspoken desire, loss, and memory.

Desire, loss, and memory are inscribed throughout the ornamental writing of Woolf and Barnes. Monika Kaup elucidates the intersections between, on the one hand, the affective elements of desire, loss, and memory and, on the other hand, the excessive, ornate, and flowing prose in *Nightwood* through her conception of the neobaroque. Kaup argues that Barnes turns to the baroque in order to challenge and rethink the discourse of linguistic functionalism that many modernists advocated. For Kaup, the neobaroque incorporates a mode of excess and ornamentation that refuses the hard, streamlined poetics of high modernism, instead focusing on loss, desire, and memory as productive forces in modernist texts by women:

Neobaroque style is the precise antithesis of the spare, austere, economical style of modernist functionalism. It champions the same ornamentation and excess that functionalism condemns, and for the same reason—because it is superabundant and wasteful, and because it is language that encodes loss rather than seamless productivity and communication. (67)

One of the political aims of ornamentation in *Nightwood* is to reveal the modernist privileging of the present without consideration for the losses suffered in the process of arriving at that very present. Additionally, the excessive detail and ornamentation of Barnes's prose has the

inverse effect of encoding *loss* rather than, as one might expect, *abundance*. Kaup compares this effect to Carlos Fuentes's argument about the baroque poetics of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*:

The Baroque, language of abundance, is also the language of insufficiency. Only those who possess nothing can include everything. The horror vacui of the Baroque is not gratuitous—it is because the vacuum exists that nothing is certain. (Fuentes 556)

Through this excerpt, Kaup is trying to explain that Barnes's ornamental and neobaroque style in *Nightwood* attempts to fill a void of representation for the desiring female subject, especially in a society that refuses to acknowledge the agency, or even the existence, of such a subject.

While Barnes employs ornamentation as a way of questioning the modernist text's ability to provide sufficient representation of marginalized groups, Woolf's textual ornamentation is more concerned with revealing the various artifices embedded into modern social structures and relationships. Because artifice is so key to the concept of ornamentation—indeed, ornament is the ultimate artifice, serving only to distract one's attention from the “true nature” of the thing itself—Woolf is able to use ornament as a way of revealing the artificial character of certain social “truths,” including class, gender, sexual orientation, and race. Of these social truths, the most obvious target in *Orlando* is that of gender, and it is primarily the excessive body that its protagonist inhabits—ornamented throughout the text with jewelry, clothing, and other items that cause him/her to vacillate between more or less defined qualities of “maleness” and “femaleness”—that exemplifies Woolf's rhetorical strategy of using artifice to examine artifice itself. Faltejskova claims that through Orlando's sexual transformation and subsequent embodiment of a constant interchange between the masculine and feminine, “Woolf importantly proposes the possibility of a third gender,” a gender which “encompasses multiple gender meanings: it is performative, individual and complex” (150). Indeed, the “performative” power contained within the excessive bodies of *Orlando* and *Nightwood* provides an alternative to modern discourses on sexual difference, undermining the negative association of the feminine with excessive detail, ornamentation, and decadence through a valorization of excess as an effective modernist poetic strategy.

Another characteristic of textual and narrative ornamentation which Kaup identifies as key to Barnes's style in *Nightwood* is the "indirection, the opaque, allegorical (rather than straightforward) manner in which...[the novel] proceeds" (80). We find the same kind of indirection and allegorical mode throughout *Orlando*, which, as Kaup argues in reference to *Nightwood*, "functions...to produce deliberate denaturalization and artificialization," in turn "delegitimizing the authority of the scientific discourses of psychoanalysis and sexology and legitimizing literature's unique way of thinking passionately, as Eliot would put it" (85). The "artificializing" characteristic of ornament is especially important to Woolf's endeavor in *Orlando* at surpassing or exceeding the normative bounds of the male-female binary. This binary, as I have previously discussed, is pivotal to high modernism's masculine-oriented poetics as well as modern discourses that associate the feminine with the decay and degeneration of Western culture.

The ornamental in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* is all-encompassing: it is formal, stylistic, thematic, linguistic, psychic, and poetic. As Kaup claims with regard to the neobaroque, the ornamentation in these two particular works of Woolf and Barnes unites several "seemingly disparate characteristics," such as:

[The] use of circumlocution, outlandish conceits, and allegorical combinations of images and concepts; the mannered artificiality of the diction, settings, and characters; the fragmentary, digressive organization of the works; the "impersonal," detached narration and the striking absence of stream-of-consciousness technique... (67)

Ornamentation, therefore, is the centerpiece of the poetics of excess that I will continue to discuss in the next two chapters. I will also identify ornamentation as a common ground upon which Woolf and Barnes express an ambivalence toward modernism as an aesthetic and poetic project more broadly. Both authors share the paradoxical position of belonging and non-belonging in relation to their male modernist counterparts, and the strategies they use in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* express an anxiety about this position. While these works are decidedly experimental in nature, there is something distinctly non-modern about them—as if their experimentation was not the right kind of experimentation. Just as Woolf and Barnes as modernist authors occupy an interstitial space between the canonical and the marginal, so too do *Orlando* and *Nightwood* as modernist texts resist categorization as either radically

experimental or moderately conventional. Part of what I will demonstrate in the following chapters is that experimentation is a construct that relies on notions of the regressive or backward for its constitution as something new or forward thinking. Thus, Woolf's and Barnes's use of ornate rhetoric, excessive description, and sentimental narrative becomes a kind of experimentation itself, an attempt to rework and reimagine these so-called worn, tired, or passé techniques.

IV. ORNAMENTAL BODIES

The simultaneous belonging and alienation that seems to characterize Woolf and Barnes as literary figures is key to a poetics of excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. Dominated by binaries—man/woman, self/other, domestic/foreign, modern/nonmodern—these works employ excess as a means of inscribing that which does not exist within these binaries: the interstices between poles, the glimpses of sameness in alleged opposites. Often, these interstices are filled with pain—the pain of loss, physical and emotional violence, political oppression—causing Woolf and Barnes to confront such pain in unique ways. In *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, experimentation with literary form becomes one of the primary tools with which Woolf and Barnes address the often contradictory spaces that they inhabit—modern yet not modern, canonical yet marginal. In both novels, Woolf and Barnes experiment through a unique mix of modernist techniques—including allusion, rupture, and stream of consciousness—and more conventional literary techniques—such as extended metaphor, allegory, and linear narrative. The resulting anxiety over formal concerns in the two novels seems to stem from the broader anxiety of existing in a world in which they are simultaneously included in and excluded from what we now identify as a modernist literary moment. While these works are by and large novels, there is no denying their poetic qualities—lyrical language, atemporal settings, fragmented dialogues. These often detract from the features that one expects to find in a novel—cohesiveness of narration, unity of time, development of character. This stylistic tension or ambiguity partakes in what Miranda Hickman describes as the broader modernist endeavor of “finding poetic form adequate both to a new modern era and to modern efforts to challenge prevailing aesthetic and socio-political habits.” However, as Hickman also notes, the formal strategies that Woolf and Barnes employ in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* are laced with “important feminist ideological freight” (34). In this chapter I will explore the use of ornamentation and excess as one such strategy in the works of Woolf and Barnes with emphasis on the presence and representation of various bodies as the vessels of such “feminist ideological freight.”

Orlando and *Nightwood* both share a preoccupation with abnormal bodies. In the former, not only does the eponymous protagonist undergo a sudden and unexplained sex change about halfway through the novel, but Woolf deliberately fills her text with other

ambiguous, androgynous, and often transgressive bodies. She introduces Orlando's first passionate love, the "Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch" (Sasha for short), as "a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity" (26). This draws parallels with both Orlando's own introduction in the novel—"He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it..."—as well as the sexual ambiguity of the Archduchess Harriet/Archduke Harry, whose dress disguises the fact that "he was a man and always had been one" until he is at last permitted to confess his love for the female Orlando within the confines of a heterosexual configuration of desire (11, 126).

Similarly, *Nightwood*'s narrative is largely driven by the misfortunes, physical and mental irregularities, and grotesque construction of its motley assortment of characters. However, in contrast to Woolf's secretive and disguised characters, Barnes's characters are conspicuously marked as freakish, bestial, and decadent/degenerate throughout her novel. Among the characters that make an appearance in *Nightwood* are a love triangle of women, a cross-dressing doctor, a self-hating Jew, and a handful of traveling circus performers. Yet, bodily representations in both *Orlando* and *Nightwood* gesture in a similar direction; both Woolf and Barnes construct transgressive and excessive bodies that serve the purpose of complementing the formal and stylistic ornamentation found in their works. In this way, there is a dual construction of bodies taking place in these works: first, the bodies written into the text with all of their individual characteristics and particularities, and second, the bodies of the texts themselves with their various formal and stylistic excesses. In these two instances of bodily and textual construction, Woolf and Barnes reveal, through reclaiming excess and ornamentation as elements of modernist style, the inherent violence and exclusionary nature of modern notions of progress, particularly regarding the marginalization or rejection of the "unfit" (female, queer, racialized, or otherwise "othered") body.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (303). By Bakhtin's definition, bodies in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* are clearly grotesque. Additionally, bodies in these works fall into the category of carnivalesque, exemplifying what Mary Russo identifies as the "translocation" of "issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender

masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system” (54). Woolf’s character of Orlando inhabits a seemingly immortal body that lives for nearly four full centuries and ages only twenty or so years. Early on in Woolf’s narrative, Orlando’s nobility denies him access to the realm of the carnivalesque—restricting him, instead, to the bounds of his family’s estate and his service under Queen Elizabeth. However, Orlando eventually embarks on a “downward” journey that continues up until his miraculous sex change about halfway through the novel. Woolf explicitly links Orlando with the carnivalesque at the beginning of this journey as he and the Russian princess Sasha are “seen to slip under the silken rope, which railed off the Royal enclosure from the public part of the river and to disappear among the crowd of common people,” who literally form a carnival upon the frozen Thames (30). From this point on, Orlando’s distance from his aristocratic roots continues to increase, as he first isolates himself inside his mansion in an effort to produce great volumes of writing, then moves to Constantinople to serve as an ambassador to the king, and finally, after his transformation into a woman, lives briefly with a group of “gipsies” before returning to England as the female Orlando.

Similarly, Barnes constructs *Nightwood* around a downward movement that reveals how certain modern discourses on science, medicine, and pathology operate in a way that perpetuates the marginalization of women and modernity’s others. Many of *Nightwood*’s chapter titles imply submission as a form of downward movement or regression, including “Bow Down,” “Where the Tree Falls,” and “Go Down, Matthew.” These kinds of descent clearly involve the type of social displacement and estrangement that Orlando undergoes in Woolf’s novel—for instance, Felix Volkbein’s exilic or diasporic existence in pursuit of a “‘pure’ racial nobility to which to ‘bow down’” (Marcus 229). They also suggest forms of sexual submission. Julie Taylor notes that “at least two allusions to the performance of oral sex” were cut from Barnes’s drafts of *Nightwood*, one of which “is a more explicit description of oral sex between two women, and suggests the connection between pleasure and debasement implied by the phrase ‘go down’” (118). The published version of *Nightwood* still contains language suggestive of this connection, especially in the depiction of the aggressive play between Nora’s dog and Robin at the end of the novel. Forms of descent or falling in *Nightwood* are also deeply concerned with descending or falling into an internal psychic damage. As the novels of Woolf and Barnes attest, this psychic damage is produced by the

pathologization of certain unfit bodies by modern scientific and medical discourses. These bodies—those of the non-male, non-heterosexual, non-white/European subject—constitute the textual fabric of *Nightwood*, and Barnes's excessive, baroque construction of such bodies in language results in what Jane Marcus refers to as the novel's "study in abjection...the figure of The One Who Is Slapped, the downtrodden victim" (221). One way of thinking about Barnes's "study in abjection," as well as the way in which she embraces regressiveness parodically, is through Judith Butler's theory of resignification. In her reading of Foucault's notion of subjection, Butler writes, "It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization" ("Subjection" 237). In this account, the "possibility of a repetition" evades the totalization or consolidation of the subject because it highlights the very nature of subjection as always in process. Drawing on Derrida's theory of *différance*, there is always room for yet another repetition with a difference, and it is "the playing movement that 'produces'...these differences, these effects of difference" with each repetition that offers the potential for resistance and transformation of given norms (Derrida 11).

When Robin first appears in *Nightwood*, Felix fixates on her eyes, "seeing them still faintly clear and timeless behind the lids—the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye." At the same time, Barnes describes Robin as "a 'picture' forever arranged," a "beast turning human," and "the infected carrier of the past" (41). This scene marks Robin with inconsistent descriptors: she is both static as a picture and dynamic as a beast turning human, as well as both past and present as someone infected with or cursed by history. Before the eyes of Felix and the reader, Robin materializes as a subject. Yet, Barnes's excessive language makes it virtually impossible to pinpoint a unique source for Robin's production as a subject, illustrating Butler's claims about the subject's continuous production through performative repetition and the non-totalizing or non-consolidating character of subjection. Robin embodies the "dissociated unity" of the modern subject, as her introduction in the text is at best fragmentary and at worst completely beyond comprehension. However, this initial subjection of Robin's body also foreshadows Barnes's resignification of the desiring female as an incontrovertible force of modernity.

Similarly, the excessive and performative display that marks Orlando's entry to womanhood calls into question the force(s) responsible for producing the modern female

subject, also gesturing toward this notion of the modern subject's "dissociated unity." The events leading up to Orlando's transformation are as vague and fantastic as the transformation scene itself. At this point in the novel, Orlando has been serving as an ambassador to Turkey for some time, and, as a reward for his service, King Charles II appoints him a duke. During the ceremony of the conferral of his dukedom, however, an uprising occurs, and Woolf's narrator explains that the following morning, Orlando "was found by his secretaries sunk in profound slumber amid bed clothes that were much tumbled." He remains in this comatose state for seven days, at which point a "terrible and bloody insurrection" takes place during which "[t]he Turks rose against the Sultan, set fire to the town, and put every foreigner they could find, either to the sword or to the bastinado." Fortunately for Orlando, the rebels mistake him for dead and leave him unharmed. As soon as all inhabitants of the British embassy have either been driven out or killed, Orlando's transformation into a woman begins, heralded by the three allegorical figures of "Purity," "Chastity," and "Modesty" (94-95).

The scene of Orlando's sexual transformation playfully and parodically multiplies excess, beginning with ornamental descriptions of each of these embodied virtues. "Lady of Purity" comes first, "whose brows are bound with fillets of the whitest lamb's wool...hair is an avalanche of the driven snow...and in whose hand reposes the white quill of a virgin goose," followed by "Lady of Chastity," "on whose brow is set like a turret of burning but unwasting fire a diadem of icicles," whose "eyes are pure stars," and whose "fingers, if they touch you, freeze you to the bone." Finally, "Lady of Modesty," "whose face is only shown as the young moon shows when it is thin and sickle shaped and half hidden among the clouds," is described as the "frailest and fairest of the three" (95). Here, Woolf's use of excess exaggerates the kinds of imagery traditionally associated with these "feminine" virtues. Purity is embodied by a blinding whiteness and is wholly untarnished, down to the "virgin goose" from which her single white quill was plucked. Lady of Chastity exaggerates the distance women are encouraged to keep between themselves and potential objects of desire to the point that her touch has the power to "freeze you to the bone." By the time Lady of Modesty appears in the paragraph, the clichéd association of femininity with the moon is unsurprising.

Prior to the arrival of the Ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, Woolf briefly introduces three additional allegorical figures: "Truth, Candor, and Honesty," who, "[p]utting their silver trumpets to their lips...demand in one blast, Truth!" (95). As the Ladies of Purity,

Chastity, and Modesty give speeches as to why Orlando should be left to slumber rather than awake and, presumably, take her new female form, Truth, Candor, and Honesty sound their trumpets and order each Lady to leave. At last the three Ladies vanish, but not before delivering a speech on their fates in society:

‘For there, not here...dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease...’ (97)

Finally, alone with Orlando in the room, Truth, Candor, and Honesty blow their trumpets in unison, demanding “THE TRUTH!” Orlando immediately awakes, and the narrator states, “Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess — he was a woman” (97).

This is the culmination of the male Orlando’s journey downward into the below or “the generating lower stratum” of Bakhtin’s grotesque body (309)—literally a physical journey downward to the genitals and their transformation. The word “truth” is key to Woolf’s critique of modern discourses on gender and sexuality as well as the role of art and literature within these discourses, and it is repeated dozens of times throughout the few pages detailing Orlando’s transformation. Central to his own poetic and aesthetic lexicon, “truth,” for Pound, is what would give poetry “its force” in the twentieth century (“A Retrospect” 13). Additionally, “truth” is what Pound’s method of “luminous detail” aims to isolate from its contextual surroundings, whether these surroundings be historical, cultural, social, literary, or otherwise. Woolf takes the notion of “Truth” (capital “T”) and ironizes it by revealing the inherently constructed nature of one particular truth: sexual difference. Christy L. Burns explains how Woolf “destabilizes” truth:

Woolf plays on a twentieth-century conception of truth, derived from the Greek notion of *alethea*, unveiling. In her novel truth is destabilized and turns into parody through an emphasis on period fashions, cross-dressing, and undressing of “essential” bodies. (343)

Burns also points to Orlando’s “incompetent narrator” as representative of an essentialist

mindset that encourages readers “to find ‘the single thread’ that ties together personal identity,” ultimately proving futile as “the effects of Orlando’s transformation through the ages...execute a parodic deconstruction of essentialist claims tentatively offered in the text” (342-343). Thus, while the narrator offers an essentialist account of identity when she insists, “The change of sex, though it altered their [Orlando’s] future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (98), we later learn that “having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando” (132). This change is evidenced by a comparison of a portrait of the male Orlando to one of the female Orlando:

The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face...The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. (132)

Like the clothes that adorn it, the body signals something about identity: its ornamental and artificial character. This would be a positive thing for Woolf, in that it counters the Western, logocentric notion of a complete, whole, and discrete ego separate from the body. This notion proceeds from a Cartesian dualism of mind and body and is implicated in many modernist ideas about the poet’s mind or personality. Moving beyond this dualistic conception of the self would allow for greater freedom in creating or at least imagining new interstices of identity, whether related to gender, sexuality, nationality, or culture. In other words, acknowledging the ornamental and artificial character of identity provides more room for negotiating the complex social and cultural terrain of modernism.

In contrast to the way in which *Orlando* expands the many ways of categorizing and constructing identity categories, Lewis offers a dualist and limiting view of the modernist artist’s or poet’s “personality” as an alternative to Eliot’s theory of impersonality:

It might be a good thing—I do not say it is—for an artist to have a ‘personality’...I mean only a constancy and consistency in being, as concretely as possible, one thing—at peace with itself, if not with the outer world, though that is likely to follow after an interval of struggle. (“T.S. Eliot” 75)

This version of personality would require the privilege that Woolf indicates when she claims that the male Orlando “looks the world full in the face,” as opposed to the female Orlando who “takes a sidelong glance at it.” In his view of personality or identity, Lewis disregards or

perhaps simply ignores the role that the body, its movements, and its presentation play in the consolidation or, more often, the fragmentation of such personality. Using the etiquette of “society in the reign of Queen Anne” (1702-1714) as a rhetorical device, Woolf reinforces the idea that bodily artifice and ornament are inherent to notions of personality and identity when Orlando is forced to learn “the science of deportment, the art of bowing and curtseying, the management of the sword and fan, the care of the teeth, the conduct of the leg, the flexibility of the knee, the proper methods of entering and leaving the room, with a thousand etceteras” in order to “pass muster” as her new female self. For Woolf, any notion of an essence of being or personality belies the ornamental and artificial character of social existence, as *Orlando*’s narrator notes: “At one and the same time, therefore, society is everything and society is nothing. Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever” (136). In many ways, this simple deconstruction of the concept of society mirrors Woolf’s sustained deconstruction of gender throughout *Orlando*—indeed, one might as well replace “society” with “gender,” and the statement would encapsulate the most prevalent themes in *Orlando*.

Many of *Orlando*’s characters—including its biographer-narrator—exemplify a claim that Bonnie Kime Scott makes about Woolf’s fictional characters more broadly. She claims that Woolf’s “fiction offers characters who have visions of wholeness, unity, and retention,” visions that ultimately “must yield to ongoing experience as it widens, becomes more politically aware, and faces the changing demands of history” (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume 2* 8). Barnes’s characters in *Nightwood*, however, make no such pretense of wholeness to ego, identity, corporeality, or any notion of self. Barnes’s characters are fragmented from beginning to end, only unraveling more and more as the novel progresses. Like *Orlando*, *Nightwood* plays with notions of high and low, employing a similarly parodic mode to deconstruct discourses that are founded upon binary systems of thought: masculine versus feminine, heterosexual versus queer/invert, healthy versus sick. Yet, Barnes’s interest in *Nightwood* lies less in “tensions between essential and constructed selves” (to borrow from the title of Christy L. Burns’s essay) and more in how abjection becomes crucial to thinking about marginalized groups—such as women, homosexuals, Jews, and blacks—in the early twentieth century, and, furthermore, how this concept of abjection is inextricably tied to the body.

Reading *Nightwood* as a Bakhtinian “revision of modernism,” Jane Marcus claims that

it “makes a modernism of marginality” (222, 223). Among Barnes’s assortment of characters are a love triangle of women, a cross-dressing doctor, a Jew trying to escape his family heritage, and a handful of traveling circus performers. Stressing their existence as marginalized, Barnes implicates these “degenerate,” “unsavory,” or “impure” outsiders within a narrative that formally complements their physical and mental attributes with a decadent and overwrought style. However, as T.S. Eliot argues in his introduction to the novel, “To regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride” (xxi-xxii).⁵ Indeed, just as it would be reductive to read Barnes’s style as indulgent merely for the sake of indulgence, it would be superficial to read her characters as united merely by their freakishness, regressiveness, and seemingly inescapable despair. Rather, *Nightwood*’s narrative reveals that its main characters share an antagonistic relationship to certain paradigms of modernity. Barnes’s poetics of excess works to reconfigure meaning within these paradigms. More specifically, the embodiment of Doctor Matthew O’Connor resignifies various terms—including woman, man, invert, gender, progression, and regression—that are vital to the lexicons of modern scientific, medical, and pathological discourses. Ultimately, Barnes shows how the queer body exceeds and challenges the bounds of modernist expression through the difficulties it poses to literary representation.

The character of Doctor Matthew O’Connor has, by far, the most spoken lines in *Nightwood*, which is important not only because it suggests a discrepancy between what is done and what is said in the text but also because it places the queer O’Connor—a cross-dressing, unlicensed gynecologist—in a conventional position of authority (i.e. he who speaks). However, as Marcus notes, the ostentatiously self-titled “Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O’Connor” serves, in one sense, as a parody of the psychoanalyst, perhaps Freud himself (233). O’Connor’s authority is illusory; indeed, it would be hard to imagine suffering

5. Eliot championed *Nightwood* as Barnes was seeking a publisher for her novel. Without his influence and editorial hand, the novel would have likely never been published. His part in editing the novel is integral to the version of *Nightwood* we read today, and the continued inclusion of his introduction in contemporary editions of the novel indicates its status as a constitutive component of the text itself rather than a discrete and separate element.

through one of his hallucinatory “talking cures.” He serves as a queered archetype of the twentieth-century psychoanalyst, a queering that works to discount certain modern discourses of science, reason, and progress. Of all *Nightwood*’s characters, it is perhaps O’Connor to whom Tim Armstrong’s following claim about the text most applies:

The novel cannot offer any integrating discourse, written as it is from a position of programmatic marginality in which all gendered constructions of the body are mocked, and abjection used to render a critique of the discourse of the hysteric. (128)

As with the women of Barnes’s novel, O’Connor resignifies the queer male body through his embodiment and performance in the text. Ultimately, his sustained parody of the medical practitioner produces an excessive narrative that, far from curing modernity of its unfit aberrations, multiplies the grotesque representation of marginality and abjection in the text.

Early in the novel, O’Connor is marked as a “degraded” or “vulgarized” form of the masculine. When he and Felix first meet at a café in Paris, Barnes writes:

His manner was that of a servant of a defunct noble family, whose movements recall, though in a degraded form, those of a late master. Even the doctor’s favourite gesture—plucking hairs out of his nostrils—seemed the ‘vulgarization’ of what was once a thoughtful plucking of the beard. (33)

Here, O’Connor’s ornamental manner of carrying his body, encompassing a range of physical habits and movements, is doubly abject as that of a servant and an obsolete aristocrat. Additionally, his “favourite gesture” perverts the masculine action of plucking one’s beard. What was “once a thoughtful” motion of the body becomes something that signifies O’Connor’s fraudulence not only as an unlicensed physician but also as a transgressive and sexually ambiguous body.

O’Connor’s narrative is one of constant transformation through his bodily representation in the text as well as his own circuitous dialogues, demonstrating “*Nightwood*’s...remaking of gender and race categories of selfhood” (Marcus 227). Barnes’s constant “remaking” of O’Connor avoids conclusive representation, as he shifts between man and woman, sacred and profane, low and high, civilized and bestial. O’Connor’s fluidity recalls Butler’s theory of resignification, particularly the way in which performativity is crucial to the reiteration and subversion of given norms. Butler writes, “regulatory norms of

‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and...to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (*Bodies That Matter* 2). Following Butler, if “regulatory norms” function performatively, then deregulatory or disruptive exceptions function performatively as well. O’Connor’s presence in *Nightwood* exaggerates sexual difference as a means of challenging its “consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.” Nora’s first encounter with O’Connor’s living quarters highlights the construction of binaries of gender and sexuality within the text and its characters. Entering O’Connor’s apartment, Nora confronts a room filled with a mess of objects, the description of which resonates with earlier spatial descriptions:

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order...a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. (Barnes 84-85)

The effect of this scene is twofold. First, it constructs a material division between male and female. The list begins with male-coded objects that associate O’Connor with science and medicine as well as the “unhappy man of genius” archetype (Kaup 113). Yet, as the list unfolds, Nora notices female-coded objects that are suggestive of an earlier scene in which Barnes describes Nora’s way of listening to “the sounds of Robin dressing”—a melody that includes “chimes of cosmetic bottles and cream jars” (64).

In addition to constructing a male-female binary, the description of O’Connor’s apartment engages with a pathological discourse of “sexual inversion” and at the same time resists the systematic and scientific categorization of “deviant” or marginalized sexualities. The second half of the list associates O’Connor with a “feminine” world of artifice: makeups, rouges, creams, etc. However, the object that connects the first and second halves of the list, the catheter, falls on neither side of the gender binary. In Marcus’s reading of *Nightwood*, she argues that “Barnes writes scatology as ontology” and “affirms being by celebrating the Below” (226). To Marcus’s many examples of this “Below,” I add the catheter, which serves as a subversive item in that it humbles the medical discourse, forcing it to “bow down” before the body as resistant to its categorizing impulse. The catheter draws attention not only to the waste functions of genitalia but also to the proliferation of uncategorizable, non-procreative genital functions. These non-procreative functions fall under the umbrella term of sodomy,

thus linking O'Connor to ideas of "sexual inversion" in modern medical discourse.

In his discussion of inversion and homosexuality at the turn of the century, George Chauncey argues, "it would be wrong to assume...that doctors created and defined the identities of 'inverts' and 'homosexuals,'" for to do so would be to "attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force" and "oversimplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness which produced gay identities" (115). Although employing a different vocabulary, this claim again evokes Butler's theories of performativity and resignification. Barnes contradictorily describes Doctor O'Connor's room as "appallingly degraded...like the rooms in brothels" and "muscular," making it a grotesque "cross between a chambre à coucher and a boxer's training camp" (85). In this narrational excess, Barnes imbues objects with new meaning through "juxtaposed imagery that seems to unsay, question, or open up the already said" (Jonsson 264). Indeed, O'Connor's ironic position as the dominant voice of the novel and "the mouthpiece of medical and religious knowledge" only serves to "destabilise the certainties and boundaries" of this very knowledge (Goody 191). If a "diseased invert" can perform the role of medical expert through language, there is no truth to the norm versus invert discourse beyond its iteration and reiteration. Barnes's construction of O'Connor ironizes sexual difference by placing the "reiterative or ritual practice" that supposedly consolidates this heteronormative discourse into the hands of a body that clearly "escapes or exceeds the norm" and "cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 10)—i.e. an abject body that speaks.

Encounters with abjection are crucial to understanding *Nightwood's* engagement with marginalized groups, and the scene directly following Nora's entrance into O'Connor's room shows the slippages of modernist representation when confronted with such abjection. Seeing the doctor "in a woman's flannel nightgown," "heavily rouged and his lashes painted," Nora thinks to herself, "God, children know something they can't tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!" (Barnes 85). Nora's affective reaction aligns O'Connor's gender fluidity with a mixing of the bestial (wolf) and the innocent (Red Riding Hood). Yet, Nora also implies that children, perhaps in a state prior to gender identification or self-awareness of sexuality, embody this fluidity of gender crossings, mixings, and desires. A performative role-reversal takes place in which Nora becomes the doctor and O'Connor the patient, faithfully performing the sexual invert. The multiplication of discourses circulating between the two characters

serves as means of “unsaying or questioning...the already said in *Nightwood*” through a “collusion between representation and anti-representation...as both exceed the attempt to represent” (Jonsson 264). This scene jumbles the signifiers of female, male, sexual invert, child, beast, science, and medicine in such a way that reconfigures their meaning(s) with each reading and challenges their ability to represent that which they supposedly signify.

Excessive bodies in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* are bodies that refuse conclusive representation based on established identity categories, especially those linked with physical or material attributes of the body—clothing, genitals, gait, etc. Meandering, overly complex, and overwrought rhetoric—what we might call the dressing or painting of language—continually enforces this refusal in several ways. First, with *Orlando*’s Orlando and *Nightwood*’s Nora, Woolf and Barnes write against a unified thinking of the self produced through a dualistic conception of mind and body. Instead, Woolf and Barnes construct these two particular characters in a way that illustrates Butler’s notion of the subject’s “dissociated unity,” produced as it is by various and often conflicting social and cultural forces. This matrix of forces implicates both Nora and Orlando within a Foucauldian power structure, and their (re)materialization as subjects illustrates Foucault’s conceptualization of the diffuse, multiple, and productive nature of power in relation to subject formation and resistance:

This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network...Resistances do not derive from a few heterogenous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior. (95-96)

The image of “points, knots, or focuses of resistance” is especially useful in reading a poetics of excess in the writing of Woolf and Barnes. Excess serves as a means of distributing these points—for Woolf, often moments in time and for Barnes, often specific objects or physical

attributes—in a way that challenges their categorization within binary systems of good and bad, male and female, high and low.

Ultimately, this enables Woolf and Barnes to employ parody as a mode of questioning certain social and cultural norms, primarily those concerned with codifying gender. The playful and excessive allegorical depiction of the feminine-coded virtues of “purity,” “chastity,” and “modesty” being chased away by the more masculine-coded virtues of “truth,” “candour,” and “honesty” constructs a true-false or artificial-real dichotomy, only to upend such a dichotomy when “truth,” “candor,” and “honesty” are called into question through Orlando’s sexual transformation. Woolf expresses the instability of the very concept of truth through parodying the use of logic to explain the “truth” of Orlando’s sexual transformation: “Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man.” Woolf’s narrator, however, has no interest in exploring this scientific route any further, sarcastically stating, “Let biologists and psychologists determine” (98). Yet, the more radical social commentary that Woolf makes through this play with logic is that constructions of gender are inextricably tied to language. Despite the existence of facts and truths in the sciences, language still dictates experience, which can be either restrictive or liberating depending upon one’s situation. If nothing else, acknowledging the constructive nature of language offers the possibility for deconstructing terms like gender, sexuality, and race (as Woolf does through her playful use of logic to deconstruct logic) and allows us to question the terms we use to define ourselves and others.

In *Nightwood*, O’Connor’s maleness is as questionable as Orlando’s, which Barnes takes up in a parody of medical and scientific discourses on inversion. Like Orlando, O’Connor’s body exceeds representation as a strictly male or female body, challenging the “truth” of gender as an essential human trait. Abjection factors heavily into Barnes’s inscription of O’Connor’s body in the text, as he occupies a space beyond subject or object, Julia Kristeva’s “place where meaning collapses” (2). He is simultaneously the therapist, the patient, and the discourse produced by the relationship between these two positions. Just as Orlando exceeds conventional categories of gender identity, O’Connor exceeds the bounds of a discourse that tries to restrain him: a pathologizing discourse that links excess, ornamentation, femininity, and sexual inversion to the decay of Western cultural values. Thus,

the parodic mode in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* relies on the excessive body. Both works engage and subvert the idea of a wholly autonomous and discrete self, essentialist notions of identity, and scientific claims to a core “truth.” As another way of positioning their texts in opposition to modern, masculine-oriented discourses on the body and its role in the writing process—including Eliot’s poetics of impersonality and a more general proscription of excessive detail and ornamentation as stylistically or formally decadent, and thereby feminine or inverted—both Woolf and Barnes focus attention throughout their narratives on the role that desire plays for the excessive body. Desire in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* is always a transgressive element, pushing the boundaries of what is representationally possible/permissible in a modernist work, especially one written by a woman. Furthermore, through their inscription of female bodies and the subsequent performativity of these bodies, Woolf and Barnes resignify a distinctly feminine desire—often, but not always, directed toward other women—as a critical force in their (re)visions of modernity and their formulations of a poetics of excess.

Despite their similarities, *Orlando* and *Nightwood* employ different strategies for exposing the inherently exclusionary practices of hegemonic strains of modernism. *Orlando*, on the one hand, opts for a gradual descent through time and space in order to expose the social manifestations of gender inequality. Woolf offers examples of these manifestations in her asides about Orlando’s life as a woman. After Orlando navigates through the precarious sexual landscape of the Victorian era, resulting in her marriage to the equally sexually ambiguous Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Woolf writes:

She had just managed, by some dexterous deference to the spirit of the age, by putting on a ring and finding a man on a moor, by loving nature and being no satirist, cynic, or psychologist — any one of which goods would have been discovered at once — to pass its examination successfully. And she heaved a deep sigh of relief, as, indeed, well she might, for the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of his works depends. Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote.

(184)

In this moment, it seems that Orlando must first “pass the examination” of the age by finding a husband and marrying before she can exist as “herself” and begin writing. While this would appear to counter Woolf’s strategy of disrupting the kinds of demands that the social power structure makes of women, there is another form of resistance in Orlando’s conscious negotiation of “the spirit of the age” (162). Avoiding an oversimplified view of Orlando’s situation as one in which “the Victorian age gets the better of her,” Derek Ryan argues that through her marriage to Shelmerdine, Orlando maintains the “disruption of sexual and gendered identities” that readers find throughout the novel by “refusing to uphold the opposition between the terms, and therefore refusing to submit to a dualistic conceptualisation of love that fully obeys the conventions of the time” (112). For Ryan, the key to identifying this refusal is the material object of the wedding ring, which, as Woolf narrates, is what initially prompts Orlando to search for a husband:

Though the seat of her trouble seemed to be the left hand, she could feel herself poisoned through and through, and was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband. (167)

Though it originally emblemizes submission to the “spirit of the age,” namely the specific patriarchal structures and conventions of this spirit, “by the time Orlando is married the ring does not symbolise union in the way it is depicted in the Victorian period of the novel...but rather signals a speed and intensity” (Ryan 112-113). Through the manipulation of time and space in *Orlando*, Woolf shows how material objects and the bodies with which they interact carry the potential for transforming the very institutions that work to impose meaning upon these objects and bodies. As Ryan writes:

Woolf is not only queering the ring but queering how we theorise such material objects — objects that are no longer seen as either symbols that stand in for some transcendent realm of meaning, nor subjugated by the (hu)man who manipulates them for his own ends. (114)

Acknowledging the transformative strategy of queering is also to acknowledge the potential for the “radical reoccupation and resignification” of the normalizing and often “noxious” terms that the dominant discourse (i.e. “the spirit of the age”) imposes on any number of social and sexual practices (Butler, “Subjection” 245). This queering recalls Doctor O’Connor’s

parody of the psychoanalyst and the way in which this parody disrupts the validity and authority of scientific and medical discourses associated with psychoanalysis. Woolf's strategy, on the other hand, takes exception with another type of normative discourse, offering a nuanced resistance that exceeds the concept of material essence. In Orlando's ring, there is no "thing itself" as evidenced by the ring's meaninglessness beyond the context in which it is placed—first, in a Victorian era of propriety and submission and then, in a modern era for which Woolf still holds much hope for transforming the social position of women through a resignification of such institutions as marriage. Desire foregrounds this hope as it represents, for Woolf, a transformative force that is capable of altering the meaning and significance of seemingly closed and exclusionary institutions for the diverse range of individuals who choose to take part in such institutions.

While Woolf's desire holds a more optimistic promise of social and structural change for women and other marginalized groups, the desire with which Barnes imbues *Nightwood's* narrative tends to question whether there is any room within existing social structures for such a desiring female body, even with the transformative process of queering that Woolf's text suggests. Sexual politics undergird the majority of *Nightwood's* thematic elements, which has resulted in many readings of the novel as a modernist inscription of feminine, particularly lesbian, desire and erotics.⁶ Yet, the essence or implications of this inscription remain elusive, as Barnes does not paint an optimistic, cheery, or hopeful portrait of the female lovers in her novel. Instead, almost immediately after their first encounter with one another, Barnes insinuates the definitive tension of Nora Flood and Robin Vote's relationship—a tension characterized by the relationship's ambivalent and discordant components of destructiveness and inescapability. During Robin's stay with Nora in New York, "Two spirits were working in her [Robin], love and anonymity. Yet they were so 'haunted' of each other that separation was impossible" (Barnes 60). Later, Nora comes to the morbid conclusion that only in death will she be able to possess Robin: "To keep her (in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray) Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death, Robin

6. For examples of such readings, see Carolyn Allen's "The Erotics of Nora's Narrative in *Nightwood*" and Judith Lee's "*Nightwood*: 'The Sweetest Lie'."

would belong to her” (63). The language in these passages evokes loss: Robin and Nora’s haunting of one another, Robin’s tendency to go astray, and the ironic solution of death to Nora’s unfulfilled desire for Robin. As Victoria L. Smith argues, loss is key to the representation of marginality in *Nightwood*. She claims that “Barnes counters ‘unspeakable’ losses in and of culture and history through a speaking or performance of those losses,” and that *Nightwood* “paradoxically performs unspeakable loss and demands that we recognize loss (of history, of a lover) as well as recognize the subject who speaks” (195). The novel produces as much meaning, if not more, through what is unsaid as it does through its explicit narrative. Barnes’s descriptions of Nora’s struggle to access a language with which she might articulate the pain of her loss often express more than the very few words Nora does manage to utter. Following Smith, conceptualizing Barnes’s text as a performance of loss accounts for its use of excessive language, particularly in regards to the relationship of Nora and Robin. Loss provokes an outpouring of ornamental language in which meaning meanders—often overdetermined by a range of images, metaphors, and conceits—disorienting the reader’s sense of place in a matrix of desire, pleasure, and pain. In her struggle to find a language that might express this complex matrix of emotions, Barnes resorts to an excessive prose, rife with fragmentary and slippery images, suggesting the role that anxieties about the representative and/or liberatory possibilities of language play in her use of such an ornamental style of writing.

The depiction of Robin as *Nightwood*’s central love object reveals this struggle with language and the disintegration of textual representation that coalesces around the female body as the novel progresses. Desire and representation in the text take on a complex, layered arrangement, as the relationship of Nora and Robin parallels, in part, that of Barnes and the “great love” of her life, Thelma Wood (Herring 156). Barnes’s construction of the text can be read as an attempt to narrate her relationship with Wood, inscribe a language that would express her desire, and/or perform (speak the unspeakable) loss that she experienced when Wood left her around the year 1928—about a year before Barnes began work on her early drafts of *Nightwood* (83, 162-164). As a counterpart to Barnes, Nora also strains to craft a representation of the object of her desire. While Robin prepares herself for a night out in Paris, Barnes describes Nora’s longing for her:

...Nora would tabulate by the sounds of Robin dressing the exact progress of

her toilet; chimes of cosmetic bottles and cream jars; the faint perfume of hair heated under the electric curlers; seeing in her mind the changing direction taken by the curls that hung on Robin's forehead, turning back from the low crown to fall in upward curves to the nape of the neck, the flat uncurved back head that spoke of some awful silence. (64)

In this description, the traditionally female-coded articles of Robin's personal space embody a "feminine" excess of artificiality that forms the surface of the subject—makeup applied in layers, curled and perfumed hair. Yet, despite this excess, Nora's imagination of the love object ends in a silence ironically spoken by Robin's body. Nora and Barnes confront limits of representation in regards to female desire, finding that the textual construction of a female body through an imaginative desire does not necessarily produce an autonomous, speaking subject. Instead, in the same scene, Nora speaks only to herself, unable to communicate her desire verbally to Robin.

Verbal communication often proves insufficient, if not disastrous, for all of *Nightwood's* characters, which is an effect of Barnes's juxtaposition of excessive dialogues (namely coming from male characters) with utter silence (namely coming from female characters). The novel's final scene marks the culmination of desire between Nora and Robin and exceeds the struggle between saying everything and saying nothing through its depiction of an animalistic exchange between Nora's dog and Robin—an exchange that says what it needs to say solely through the body. The scene opens with an amassment of miscellaneous objects: "On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning. Their light fell across the floor and the dusty benches. Before the image lay flowers and toys." Led by her dog, Nora finds Robin "in her boy's trousers" standing before the chapel altar and immediately faints. At the same moment, Robin goes "down" until she is "on all fours...dragging her knees," backs Nora's dog "into the farthest corner," and begins driving her body against him as he moves from side to side. Finally, Robin begins barking with the dog, which gradually subsides to "grinning and crying with him," and eventually the two lie down, "his head flat along her knees" (178-180).

It is not a coincidence that an animal brings Nora and Robin close to one another once again at the end of the novel. The image of the domesticated dog turning wild (the tame turning untamed) in the presence of Robin plays into the resignification of a desiring female

body (the human turning beast) by way of this final performance. Robin and the dog perform a distinctly physical interplay of human and animal bodies that Scott reads as “a therapeutic run through the emotions, full of gesture, movement, and even pain” (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume 2* 117). Admittedly, there is a curative force to this display. If there is any redemption for the central female lovers of the text, it seems to be through the unabashed performance of these gestures, emotions, pleasures, and pains as well as the “conscious and unconscious struggle, circulations of power, failure of nerve, and fear of loss” that come with the territory of writing and acting on one’s desire as a lesbian or bisexual woman (Allen, *Following Djuna* 23). Thus, by means of writing these desiring and desired female bodies and performing the bestial as such desire, *Nightwood* resignifies terms that are crucial to this desire—including love, lust, and loss—and “pushe[s] the resources of modernist narration to the point of exasperation” (Miller 149). At the same time, like *Orlando*, the novel asks its readers to reconsider the possibilities for representing alternative configurations of desire, gendered subjectivities, and marginal sexualities in modernist literature. For Woolf and Barnes, excessive bodies play a central role in this process of rethinking what constitutes socially acceptable desire, theorizing how gender is constructed in language and then assumed (performed) by each of us, and altering or exploring what Foucault calls “the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible these may be” (106). Indeed, the poetics of excess in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* multiplies these aspects of human experience through Woolf and Barnes’s writing of the ornamental body—a transgressive, ever-changing body that escapes conclusive representation through its very material and textual construction.

V. NARRATION AS ORNAMENTATION

In *The Language of Ornament* James Trilling argues that the common “account of the death of ornament and the birth of modernism is much too neat, not least because ornament never died” (186). According to Trilling, ornament was never truly banished or done away with in the twentieth century, but rather, like modernism’s re-gendering of the detail, artists, architects, and aesthetic critics of the modern era conceived of a distinctly “modernist ornament.” This term denotes, Trilling explains, “a specific hitherto unrecognized current within modernism itself, and a style of ornament emblematic of the twentieth century, as the Rococo style is emblematic of the eighteenth.” For Trilling, this ornamental style of the modernist era “consists of two aspects or phases, linked by a fascination with spontaneous, inchoate or indeterminate form, and a corresponding disdain for order or contrivance.” More specifically, both of these aspects—one in which “ornamental forms come directly from natural materials or technical processes” and the other in which “[f]orms are no longer just selected, but deliberately shaped to suggest unpredictability”—ultimately “reflect the modernist distrust of anything ‘artificial’” and “are sufficiently removed from traditional ornament to bolster the modernists’ professed antipathy to ornament in any form” (187). While Trilling’s primary focus with these arguments is in the visual arts, his theory of modernist ornament as indicative of modernist rejection of artifice resonates with my discussion of the use of ornament in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. It is fitting to draw a comparison between Trilling’s two “aspects or phases” of modernist ornament and modernist formal techniques common to Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Lewis. In the first phase, the “natural materials or technical processes” would correspond to the Western tradition, myth, and history from which these writers drew in their works. In the second, the deliberate manipulation in order to “suggest unpredictability” would encompass these writers’ most prized formal and stylistic techniques, such as translation, intertextuality, collage, pastiche, allusion, rupture, and depersonalization. Thus, the kind of ornamentation employed in modernist works is key to its marking and acceptance as a “new” modernist *technique* rather than mere decoration. This logic, of course, can be applied in its reverse to devalue the use of ornament and detail in works like *Orlando* and *Nightwood*—that is, these works embrace the decorative aspects of ornamentation in many ways, thus designating them as *not* “new” and decidedly non- or

antimodernist.

As the preceding chapters have discussed, the kind of ornamentation found in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* is a feminine/feminist ornamentation that makes no pretense of denying or casting off its artificiality. Instead, the textual ornamentation of Woolf and Barnes embraces the artificial as a strategy for undermining the authority of modern discourses that advance a sexist and essentialist view of the body and its ontology. In this chapter, I will explore the purely formal and stylistic manifestations of ornamentation and excess in Woolf's and Barnes's texts. Whereas in chapter two, I considered the bodies of specific characters in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* as texts themselves, inscribed with certain excesses and ornaments as they materialize in language, in this chapter I will consider the texts of *Orlando* and *Nightwood* as bodies themselves, formally and stylistically laden with the same excesses and ornaments as their characters. Like the grotesque attributes of the characters in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, the excessive formal and stylistic elements of the texts—including self-consciously artificial rhetoric, exaggerated metaphor and conceit, and cross-genre transgressions—manifest as physical protrusions, mutations, or aberrations. Through a close reading of these elements, it becomes clear that what seems non/anti-modern in these authors' texts actually gives them their distinctly modernist character.

In considering narration as a kind of ornamentation, I will also discuss the temporal excesses of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. While the former narrates, without logical explanation, the life of its protagonist over a time period of some three hundred years, the latter portrays, beginning in 1880, three generations of the Volkbein family—a family with a distressing relation to the past, anchored within the figure of the Jew. Stylistically, both novels draw on what T.S. Eliot, in his introduction to *Nightwood*, refers to as “a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy” (xxii). These works have a peculiar relation to the past that gestures toward historical excess, a kind of spectral presence that distorts and challenges conventional notions of modern time and progress through expansive chronologies. From this perspective, the seemingly conventional linear narratives of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*—the kind of narratives that most would consider unmodern, even antiquarian at this point—play with and disrupt a notion of modernist lineage or heritage through questioning and challenging which modern subjects are allowed access to such a past.

Transposing a terminology or theory of ornament from a predominantly visual realm to

a strictly literary or textual realm poses a few problems. Determining the functionality of a text is all but impossible, particularly in the case of a fictional or poetic text. We might resort to debating the purpose of literature as a criterion against which we could judge whether or not a text succeeds in being “functional.” Yet, definitions of the purpose of literature vary so widely that it would hardly be possible to produce a coherent and consistent description of a fully “functional text” that would come close to something like Loos’s notion of functionality as the degree to which an object fulfills the practical use for which it was designed. If anything, one could argue that, at the most fundamental level, the function of a literary text is to produce meaning for its readers. Meaning, however, is never easy to identify, determine, and/or quantify. Furthermore, meaning is generated in different ways for different readers by different aspects of the text. Allan Hepburn points out the role that detail plays in a text’s generation of meaning and how detail avoids textual closure and opens up the possibility for a multiplicity of meanings. He argues:

Detail seesaws between an excess and impoverishment of meaning...Details provide a point of departure for interpretation and cultural possibility. They do not necessarily provide a platform for truth or a single dominant meaning. Details do not accumulate into a total meaning... (64)

In this account, detail obscures as much as it explains, it hides as much as it reveals, leaving the reader and his or her sensibilities to suss out why such detail is included in the narrative. This is one of the primary textual functions of detail that contributes to the strategic use of a poetics of excess in the works of Woolf and Barnes.

In *Orlando*, Woolf’s introduction of the Russian princess Sasha has her sex disguised by “the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion.” Furthermore, many of Sasha’s physical attributes—the fact that she “was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur”—are “obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person.” This summons in Orlando “[i]mages, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant,” prompting him to call her “a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow” (26). These images and metaphors return time and time again in moments of Orlando’s desire for Sasha. Seated upon the frozen Thames one night, Orlando tries to tell Sasha “what she was like”:

Snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire? None of these. She was like a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded — like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. (32)

On another outing, Orlando continues to search for words with which to describe the princess, confessing that “he could find no words to praise her” and yet immediately thinking “how she was like the spring and green grass and rushing waters” (39). Poetically cliché on its surface, the image of Sasha that Orlando constructs is overdetermined by a disparate assortment of objects and sensations which have a linguistically overwhelming and exhausting effect on the reader, as well as on Orlando himself. Phonetically, the individual nouns that begin the first list—“snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire”—resonate richly with one another yet do not seem to employ any calculated poetic devices, such as assonance, consonance, or alliteration. They are, as it were, textual ornaments—indeed, one can almost see them hanging there from the page, strung together by commas.

This textual ornamentation recalls Kaup’s conceptualization of the neobaroque and Fuentes’s claim that “only those who possess nothing can include everything,” Orlando feeling as though he is left with nothing after exhausting all attempts at representing the object of his desire. He often falls into a melancholic slump and entertains thoughts like, “Ruin and death...cover all...Worms devour us” (41). However, there is also excitement in Woolf’s textual excesses. This excitement sees the temporary failure of language as nothing more than an opportunity for further possibilities. Despite his frustration on the evening when “he could find no words to praise her,” Orlando continues to write—figuratively through his descriptions of Sasha and literally as a poet him/herself throughout the novel—recognizing shortly after that “[e]verything suffered emaciation and transformation” as the sun set (39). Transformation is central to Orlando’s narrative, and ornamentation serves as one of the underlying forces that foregrounds the numerous material and corporeal transformations throughout the novel.

In one instance, after the now female Orlando has prepared herself for a drive to London, Woolf presents the reader with a series of multiplying similes and metaphors describing Orlando’s appearance. The ornamentation in this passage demonstrates Woolf’s

privileging of the mutable and fluid in language:

What woman would not have kindled to see what Orlando saw then burning in the snow — for all about the looking-glass were snowy lawns, and she was like a fire, a burning bush, and the candle flames about her head were silver leaves; or again, the glass was green water, and she a mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leant from their boats and fell down, down to embrace her; so dark, so bright, so hard, so soft, was she, so astonishingly seductive that it was a thousand pities that there was no one there to put it in plain English... (130)

As the ultimate authority of her work, Woolf is “there” and could easily “put it in plain English,” but she chooses not to do so. The passage follows Scott’s claim that “Woolf’s scaffolding...arises in personal rapture and present history...provid[ing] a base for a rich web of narrative attachments and returns” (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume 2* 4). The poetics of excess in Woolf’s work contributes to this web, providing a textual ornamentation that engages, and perhaps indulges in, the transformative possibilities of language.

A particular approach to the production of meaning through language lies at the core of this kind of ornamentation in Woolf’s and Barnes’s texts. Hepburn suggests that visual ornament has, in theory, a syntax transposable to language. This syntax, in turn, affects the way a text produces meaning when that text consciously makes use of ornament. He writes:

The syntax of ornament has grammatical features such as colour, symmetry, detail, and repetition. Geometric or organic patterns organize visual material and thereby establish the syntax of ornament...In narrative, no reader can forecast which passages ornament the plot, in the sense that some pages or paragraphs might be skipped without injuring the overall meaning of a novel...Just as the syntax of visual ornament is not reducible to a single meaning, fictional narrative, despite its ornamental details and expository elaboration, does not add up to one unequivocal interpretation. (97)

Following Hepburn, the excessive, meandering, and circular language that Woolf and Barnes use in their works has the effect of resisting closure, which is integral to the form of the conventional novel. Multiplied metaphors, therefore, become highly modernist literary devices, as they question the existence of universal truths, just as the bodies within *Orlando*

and *Nightwood* question the existence of various established differences, be they sexual, racial, or otherwise. In other words, for Woolf and Barnes, the metaphor is not “A is like B” or “B is as C,” but rather “A is like B; or perhaps like C; or even like Y; but still, sometimes, like Z.” Excess, however, never seems to fully exhaust language.

Similar to Orlando, *Nightwood*'s purely formal and stylistic elements question the validity of certain claims to universal meaning or knowledge. Discrepancies among the diverse critiques and interpretations of *Nightwood*'s formal construction reflect a debate over the textual detail or ornament and its role as literary device. T.S. Eliot's introduction to *Nightwood* offers one of the most authoritative evaluations of the text. In his introduction, Eliot draws attention to the novel's prose technique, which he describes as consisting of “the prose rhythm that is prose style, and the musical pattern which is not that of verse” (xviii). It is important to Eliot that Barnes's work is not poetry, implicitly placing her within the tradition of Woolf, Joyce, and other poetic novelists. Eliot positions Barnes and *Nightwood* within existing frameworks of modernism before readers encounter the text. Furthermore, he emphasizes “the whole pattern” formed by *Nightwood*'s characters, which, for him, exhibits a “deeper design...of the human misery and bondage which is universal” (xxi). Again, Eliot tries to integrate the particularities of Barnes's details—her stylistic idiosyncrasies and freakish characters—into a more general modernist scheme—a tradition of prose technique and the notion of universal human suffering.

Monika Kaup, on the other hand, explores Barnes's development of a “neobaroque” style. While she attributes the label of neobaroque to a number of peculiarities in Barnes's work, her approach differs from Eliot's in that, rather than situating her work within a baroque or neobaroque “tradition,” Kaup identifies the ways in which Barnes recasts the excess of baroque aesthetics in order to express a wide range of difficult and often conflicting sentiments, including desire, loss, lust, love, hatred, hopefulness, and hopelessness. Thus, whereas Eliot situates Barnes's work within the discursive realms of high modernist literary production and claims to the universal (Miller 122), Kaup multiplies the ways in which we can read Barnes by focusing on a style of ornamentation that has associations with the feminine and the pathological through its perceived excessiveness.

Embracing the superfluous and excessive, *Nightwood*'s opening paragraph is a single, elongated sentence, and pages upon pages of the novel contain Doctor Matthew O'Connor's

feverish, long-winded harangues. In addition, readers often confront long lists of objects strung together haphazardly (at least at first glance), with the purpose of textually furnishing physical spaces. Two passages in particular illustrate this material ornamentation of Barnes's prose. First, Barnes describes the Viennese home of Guido and Hedvig Volkbein as "a fantastic museum of their encounter," the "long rococo halls" of which "were peopled with Roman fragments, white and disassociated; a runner's leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken at the bosom, the blind bold sockets of the eyes given a pupil by every shifting shadow" (8). In a parallel scene, Nora Flood notes the various objects furnishing the apartment she shares with Robin Vote, again described as "the museum of their encounter":

There were circus chairs, wooden horses bought from a ring of an old merry-go-round, venetian chandeliers from the Flea Fair, stage-drops from Munich, cherubim from Vienna, ecclesiastical hangings from Rome, a spinet from England, and a miscellaneous collection of music boxes from many countries.
(61)

In these passages, Barnes juxtaposes the notion of the orderly or methodical museum with the modifiers "disassociated" and "miscellaneous." Contextually, the objects inhabiting both of these dwellings are common to the personal experiences of their inhabitants and, thus, exhibit some kind of logical pattern. Yet, the incongruities between each successive object in these lists suggest an unclassifiable and unrestrained excess produced by certain economies of desire. For each of the two couples, this desire takes on different forms and directs itself at different objects. Nevertheless, in both cases, Barnes inscribes desire through the use of copious prose in order to articulate such desire and speak "'unspeakable' losses" (Smith 195).

Similar to the way in which the textual excesses in Woolf's narrative suggest a pleasure in the possibilities of language, Barnes's ornamentation gestures toward the potential for pain and suffering that arises from desire and affect. Julie Taylor discusses the central role of affect in Barnes's oeuvre, conceptualizing *Nightwood* as a "feeling body": "As a text that produces and displays affect, *Nightwood* might well be imagined as a body, for Barnes, as we have seen, suggests that it is through bodies that feelings must be understood" (113-114). If *Orlando* produces new and multifarious meaning through a compounding of disparate imagery in strings of metaphors and other ornamental trimmings of language, *Nightwood* produces a similar kind of meaning through the way in which it drags its readers, sometimes

sadomasochistically, through an excess of language that produces an excess of affect. Just as Orlando exhausts himself linguistically in an attempt to describe the princess Sasha, *Nightwood's* text is affectively exhausting, making it difficult or even impossible for its readers to pinpoint the source of such affect.

Toward the end of *Nightwood's* "Nightwatch" chapter, just before Jenny Petherbridge enters the narrative, Barnes constructs a multilayered scene that overwhelms the reader with this excessive and exhaustive affect. Late one night, as Nora restlessly awaits Robin's return to their shared apartment, Barnes describes a surrealistic dream that Nora experiences in which she hears her grandmother's voice calling her from what appears to be her grandmother's room. However, Nora quickly realizes:

This chamber that had never been her grandmother's, which was, on the contrary, the absolute opposite of any known room her grandmother had ever moved or lived in, was nevertheless saturated with the lost presence of her grandmother, who seemed in the continual process of leaving it. (68)

This sentence exemplifies Barnes's circuitous prose, which often leads the reader through a series of contradictory thoughts with no definitive meaning to be extracted. In this particular instance, Barnes suggests that Nora's "dream world" and "real world" are gradually seeping into one another, her grandmother becoming Robin—the love object that continually slips away—and her grandmother's room becoming the apartment she shares with Robin—a room paradoxically "saturated" with Robin's absence. When she awakens from the dream, Nora looks "out into the garden in the faint light of dawn" and sees "a double shadow falling from the statue, as if it were multiplying, and thinking perhaps this was Robin, she called and was not answered." She then sees "emerge from the darkness the light of Robin's eyes" (69). The image of the multiplied "double shadow" mirrors Barnes's multiplication of affect in this scene and the way in which she constantly shifts perspectives in order to avoid presenting affect as a concept that follows a linear or cause-and-effect logic. Instead, affect, feeling, and emotion drift among the various subjects and objects in this scene—Nora, Nora's grandmother, Robin, the room in the dream, and the apartment in reality—making it impossible to determine what causes the affect and why. In part, this accounts for Nora's silence throughout the scene, her words at the end of the chapter reinforcing Barnes's resistance to closure throughout the novel: "Now they will not hold together" (70).

Like most of its characters, Barnes's text and its devices long for a sense of closure that will never come. In an elaborately constructed description of Nora, Barnes writes:

By temperament Nora was an early Christian; she believed the word. There is a gap in "world pain" through which the singular falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its withdrawal kept the body eternally moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye. Such a singular was Nora. There was some derangement in her equilibrium that kept her immune from her own descent. (56-57)

Like Nora, *Nightwood's* text embraces its own descent into the depths of a language from which there may be no return—a language which threatens to disintegrate into non-meaning through its own circuitousness and overwrought construction. The passage clearly recalls tropes of moving downward and submission. However, Barnes suggests here that there is no ultimate low-point at the bottom of this descent—we will never "get to the bottom of things," as it were. Instead, she focuses our attention on the movement of the text itself. Like Nora's eyes, which Barnes describes as having "that mirrorless look of polished metals which report not so much the object as the movement of the object" (57), *Nightwood's* narrative focuses on the movement of the text, an ebb and flow through ornamented spaces, whether these spaces be physical rooms, bodily surfaces, or interior psyches. Yet, no matter how far the text descends away from meaning, the reader, or even itself, it persists in longing for that from which it falls away—the bodies of its characters, a history that never was, the lost object of desire. The text, then, mirrors Nora's own struggle when Robin begins leaving her night after night to wander through Paris, explaining that "[a]s an amputated hand cannot be disowned because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is its forebear, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce" (65).

Time in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* parallels Barnes's image or metaphor of the amputated limb. While both novels visualize time in a relatively linear manner, there are numerous moments of rupture in both texts that embody an amputation of the past and future from an immediate and persistent present. Try as they may, the texts are unable to free themselves of the memories of the past and the hopes and fears of the future in such a way that

would allow them to “make it new” in the Poundian sense. Both novels, therefore, advance narratives of temporal excess in which time serves as yet another ornamental feature of the text itself. Similar to their textual construction of bodies, Woolf and Barnes conceive of time as an intrinsically artificial narrative element that the author manipulates and positions in order to challenge traditional historical frameworks and timelines. In their own ways, *Orlando* in a more celebratory manner and *Nightwood* in a more mournful manner, the novels of Woolf and Barnes ultimately engage excess as a way of bringing the past—which is often violent and painful for these authors—into the present in an effort to explain the conditions of modernity which surround them.

One of the most important figures in Barnes’s exploration of history and its connection to the present is that of the modern Jew. The modern Jew, in Barnes’s narrative, embodies an anonymity that is unlike that of *Nightwood*’s other characters, most of whom are able to conceal, in one way or another, their psychic deformities or irregularities. For Barnes’s central Jewish characters, anonymity is not a characteristic that would allow them to escape conformity to modern social constructs. In precisely the opposite manner, Guido and Felix Volkbein seek a social anonymity that would allow them to mask the marks of their cultural heritage and past and attain assimilation in Western Christian hegemony. Guido takes this striving toward anonymity to such an extreme that he purchases and passes off the portraits of two individuals as his aristocratic, Christian parents, knowing that he would eventually “need an alibi for the blood” from which he claims to have descended (Barnes 9-10). Although “blood” here symbolizes a family line, it also literally ties the Jew to his (Barnes only offers a depiction of the male Jew) body—a body marked by racial difference. Like the female and queer bodies, this inscription of the Jew’s body “functions in Barnes’s novel to signal the potentials and limits of representation” (Goody 189). An embodied spatial and temporal excess that lies at the core of Jewish subjectivity in the text makes the Jew “[seem] to be everywhere from nowhere” (Barnes 10). Barnes’s Jew is, thus, characterized by yet another pathologizing discourse that must be reconfigured to find any hopes of representational possibility and redemption.

In the opening pages of *Nightwood*, Barnes depicts the scene of Felix Volkbein’s birth by Hedvig Volkbein “upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg” (3). The year is 1880, which positions

Felix as a living link between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially since his mother dies in childbirth and his father died six months prior to his birth. In this way, Guido's intent in life is achieved, as he converts to Christianity for "the promise that hung at the Christian belt of Hedvig." Yet, as readers discover, this extreme act of assimilation cannot "span the impossible gap," Barnes noting that "the saddest and most futile gesture of all had been his [Guido's] pretence to a barony" (5). In a sense, this "pretence" will haunt Felix as he personifies the "wandering Jew" archetype in a quest for an identity rooted outside of his family past (Goody 190).

In a misguided continuation of his father's attempt to associate himself and his family with a European nobility, Felix finds comfort in "the pageantry of the circus and the theatre" as a way of "link[ing] his emotions to the higher and unattainable pageantry of kings and queens" (Barnes 13). Ironically, Felix clearly deciphers the constructed nature of the circus or carnival personas, "their splendid and reeking falsification" (14), yet he does not apply this deconstructive approach to the "pageantry of kings and queens." As Marcus notes, while Felix's "restless search for 'pure' racial nobility to which to 'bow down' signifies his internalization of racial difference," it also ironically reveals "the reality of a Europe in which racial purity has been obscured by mixed marriages and false credentials" (229). Barnes challenges and undermines the notion of "pure racial nobility" in her description of Felix's pursuit of a nobility that relies upon a long-recycled ideology of racial exclusion, domination, and destruction. Even Felix admits, "His embarrassment took the form of an obsession for what he termed 'Old Europe': aristocracy, nobility, royalty. He spoke any given title with a pause before and after the name" (11). In his speech as well as his mannerisms, Felix endeavors to reify what he associates with "Old Europe": in Paris, he is described as "searching...for the correct thing to which to pay tribute" and "bow[ing] slightly to anyone who looked as if he might be 'someone'" (12). He even keeps a valet and a cook solely because they resemble Louis XIV and Queen Victoria.

So, why is the obsession with bending toward and "bowing down" to a racial past so key to Barnes's representation of the Jew in *Nightwood*? For one, it highlights the Jew's "nomadic unfixity" and his attraction "to a huge range of cultural artefacts and activities...that reverberate with an 'oddness'" in his "search for a form that could reflect a stable and singular sense of himself back to him" (Goody 190). Deborah L. Parsons notes that "Barnes identifies

the freak spectacle explicitly with the Jew, the sexual invert and the physically disabled” (267), which, in turn, creates a solidarity at the margins of modernity. In fact, O’Connor makes an explicit comparison of Felix, about whom there is “something missing and whole,” to the disabled “Mademoiselle Basquette, who was damned from the waist down, a girl without legs, built like a medieval abuse” (29). Both call into question a binary of complete versus incomplete, Felix, again, being “everywhere from nowhere” and Basquette possessing a more obvious presence by the very absence of half her body. Furthermore, the doctor’s ensuing narrative of Basquette’s rape speaks to the historical precariousness of the Jewish body, perhaps suggesting that Basquette and Felix risk occupying something like Agamben’s figure of the homo sacer, bodies that may be killed with impunity (82).

Yet, there still remains a racial and historical specificity to Felix that distinguishes him from his freakish counterparts. Barnes’s excessive style simultaneously suggests a nostalgic longing for cultural, historical, and spatial grounding and the need to remember a past of traumatic experiences. Strolling through the Prater in Vienna, Felix’s father carries an “exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen that cried aloud the ordinance of 1468...demanding that, with a rope about its neck, Guido’s race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace.” It is the painful memory evoked by this material object that encapsulates, according to Barnes, “the sum total of what is the Jew” (4-5). Even more telling than the traumatic memory is Guido’s vicarious participation in the event:

He had walked, hot, incautious and damned, his eyelids quivering over the thick eyeballs, black with the pain of a participation that, four centuries later, made him a victim, as he felt the echo in his own throat of that cry running the Piazza Montanara long ago, “Roba vecchia!”—the degradation by which his people had survived. (5)

Again, what is important here is the difference in repeating—the performative reiteration of “Roba vecchia” as a means of remembering and resisting the injury that the past still inflicts in the present. Here, the neobaroque style that Barnes uses to inscribe Guido’s “racial memories” achieves “the multiplication of meaning that occurs when a totalitarian regime of codes is dismantled...a multiplication that undoes the power of that regime” (Goody 192). Barnes’s Jewish body is characterized by an anomalous relationship to the past that implores its readers to be wary of underestimating the discursive forces that are actively and often inconspicuously

at work on such bodies.

Orlando posits the body of a single individual as the carrier of three-hundred or so years of history, notably a European-English narrative of history. Orlando's body is a social body, interacting with and adapting to its social surroundings as Woolf's narrative moves through different historical eras. Yet, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, "Bodies are never simply human bodies or social bodies." As previously discussed, Orlando's inexplicable sex change and her subsequent life as a woman reveal how "[t]he sex assigned to the body...makes a great deal of difference to the kind of social subject, and indeed the mode of corporeality assigned to the subject" (84). The narrative element of time serves to further complicate gender in *Orlando* by showing how historical particularities and their residues in the present contribute to and in part define modern discourses on gender and sexuality. Erica L. Johnson uses the theoretical model of "haunting" to explain how Woolf's narrative uses Orlando as a conduit through history in order to expose the exclusionary character of notions of national identity:

...Orlando's elemental relationship to national space ensures that his/her national identity remains both constant and English. By substantiating the continuity in Orlando's transhistorical, transgender character through national identity, though, Woolf shows Englishness to be composed of exclusions as well as inclusions, revealing the extent to which national identity is haunted by what she might have called "invisible presences," which inhabit national space not as subjects and citizens, but as ghosts. (113)

As Johnson notes, the term "invisible presences" comes from Woolf's essay "A Sketch of the Past," in which she "considers a more generalized understanding of ghosts as social forces" (126). If one thinks of these "ghosts," "hauntings," or "specters" as historical moments that exceed their specific manifestations in time, it is clear that the body of Orlando in Woolf's novel must continually confront these excesses—just as Felix confronts the excesses of a traumatic "racial past"—in order to make sense of them as forces that affect the social and cultural fabric of the present.

Aside from his/her Englishness, one of the materially grounding elements of Orlando's long life is his/her "great house in the countryside" (Woolf, *Orlando* 47). This is the dwelling to which the male Orlando retires in solitude after Sasha seemingly abandons him to return to Russia and also to which the female Orlando returns from Turkey, ultimately to inhabit with

her husband Shelmerdine. The home embodies a historical materiality. It serves as a repository for many artifacts and heirlooms of Orlando's family as well as objects to which Orlando feels an intimate personal attachment. One of Orlando's most prized and meaningful possessions early on in the novel is "a great inlaid cabinet" within which "were some fifty drawers of cedar wood." These drawers contain Orlando's various writings, the narrator noting that "there was scarcely a single drawer that lacked the name of some mythological personage at a crisis of his career" (54). In her annotations to *Orlando*, Sandra M. Gilbert remarks that "this cabinet belonged to Vita [Sackville-West], and was where she kept all her most intimate letters...Orlando's prolific writings parallel those of Vita, both as a child and a young woman" (241).⁷ Here, Woolf inscribes a dual history—or, perhaps, transcribes one history onto another. On the one hand, we have the traces of Orlando's development as a writer throughout his/her childhood and adolescence in his/her "some forty-seven plays, histories, romances, poems; some in prose, some in verse; some in French, some in Italian; all romantic, and all long" (Woolf, *Orlando* 54). On the other hand, we have traces of Woolf's personal history with Vita written into the text as a way of mixing fantasy and reality, past and present, the momentary and the immortal. Like Barnes's loose framework for *Nightwood* centered around her own relationship with another woman, Thelma Wood, Woolf's personal connection with Sackville-West flows beyond lived experience and into text as a way of complicating a seemingly linear (albeit fantastic) chronology with extra-textual experience.

As the tongue-in-cheek inclusion of "*A Biography*" in the title of the novel suggests, memory is both central to *Orlando*'s narrative and complicated by the fact that the novel is not a factually accurate biography. The notion of memory not only brings into question the possibility of recalling historical events with factual accuracy, but it also makes *Orlando* a

7. Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West was complex and multifaceted, at various times professional, friendly, romantic, and sexual. Sackville-West's connection to *Orlando* is made explicit in Woolf's diary when she writes, "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three* 161). Scott states that *Orlando* "offers the return of Knole, the family home denied Vita by male primogeniture in 1928" (*Refiguring Modernism, Volume 1* 253), which explains Woolf's inclusion of a cabinet in Orlando's home that represents the cabinet where Sackville-West kept letters of personal importance.

novel that employs a strategy of inscribing something like the “transactions of cultural memory” that Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith describe in “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction”:

These transactions emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires. Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory. Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation. They require agents and specific contexts. They can be conscious and deliberate; at the same time, and this is certainly true in the case of trauma, they can be involuntary, repetitious, obsessive. (5)

While Hirsch and Smith are primarily interested in photography as a technology and media through which memory is transmitted, a poetics of excess might also act as a formal or stylistic technology that carries the potential for articulating and shaping cultural memory. While *Nightwood* seems to offer much darker and traumatic memories of cultural and social violence in the form of misogyny, antisemitism, and homophobia, *Orlando* reshapes cultural memory through the inscription of an equally violent, albeit more subtle, social and cultural exclusion based on gender and sexuality.

Readers witness some of the cumulative effects of this exclusionary practice toward the end of the novel when Orlando experiences a personal or existential crisis as she is driving back to her country home from London. The narrator prefaces this crisis by claiming that Orlando “had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for” and that in this moment, she was seeking the “true self,” “which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire.” Yet, as Orlando continues her drive, rattling off the material history that has formed her identity—“The leopards,” “My ancestors,” “my books,” “trees,” “barns,” “sheep dogs”—her monologue is constantly interrupted by the narrator noting, “here a new self came in” (213-214). Just as what would seem to be the culmination of her success enters into the frame of this history—i.e. her fame, the publication of her lifelong work “The Oak Tree,” and a prestigious literary award—the narrator again interrupts:

...and we must snatch this space to remark how discomposing it is for her biographer that this culmination to which the whole book moved, this peroration with which the book was about to end, should be dashed from us on a laugh casually like this; but the truth is that when we write of a woman, everything is out of place — culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man. (215)

The force of history is one such “accent” that, in Woolf’s words, does not fall for a woman where it falls for a man. In Orlando’s history, the accent does not fall on the so-called major events and accomplishments of fame, publication, and awards, but rather on the countless lived experiences that generate meaning in one’s life. For Woolf, these lived experiences are inextricable from the material realities and attachments of those who live them. This is why, upon finally returning to her country home before the end of the novel, Orlando places so much emphasis upon the traces of history left on each of the rooms of the home: “She fancied that the rooms brightened as she came in; stirred, opened their eyes as if they had been dozing in her absence” (217). Through their personification, the rooms become living, feeling beings of their own, challenging the conventional view that writing is a process of actively inscribing experience or history upon a passive materiality. For Woolf and Orlando, materiality inflects history and experience, at some point exceeding both of these elements. For, as the narrator notes before the novel’s final chronological transition into the twentieth century, “The house was no longer hers [Orlando’s] entirely, she sighed. It belonged to time now; to history; was past the touch and control of the living” (219). In the end, Woolf asks her readers to reconsider notions of history that do not account for the transformative power of material conditions and particularities, as these often exceed our ability to understand history as a series of facts, especially for those excluded from conventional historical narratives.

VI. CONCLUSION: READING EXCESS

Moments before *Orlando*'s closing sentence, which brings its contemporary readers into the immediate present, its narrative slows remarkably and shifts focus onto Orlando's sensory interactions with her surroundings. While it is unclear whether all the objects and figures in these surroundings are physically present or projected through her imagination, I am more interested in Orlando's extreme attention to detail in these pages—the way in which, Woolf's narrator notes, “everything near her showed with extreme distinctness” (220). Over the course of several paragraphs, the narrator recounts Orlando's various observations:

She saw two flies circling round and noticed the blue sheen on their bodies; she saw a knot in the wood where her foot was, and the dog's ear twitching. At the same time, she heard a bough creaking in the garden, a sheep coughing in the park, a swift screaming past the window. Her own body quivered and tingled as if suddenly stood naked in a hard frost...She noticed the separate grains of earth in the flower beds as if she had a microscope stuck to her eye. She saw the intricacy of the twigs of every tree. Each blade of grass was distinct and the marking of veins and petals. She saw [Joe] Stubbs, the gardener, and every button on his gaiters was visible; she saw Betty and Prince, the cart horses, and never had she marked so clearly the white star on Betty's forehead, and the three long hairs that fell down below the rest on Prince's tail...She saw with disgusting vividness that the thumb on Joe's right hand was without a finger nail and there was a raised saucer of pink flesh where the nail should have been. (222-223)

In these sentences, detail magnifies, having a sensorily overwhelming effect on Orlando and her body as she tries to keep up with the details as they present themselves. The excess of detail—its strength in numbers, its magnification, its inescapability—dominates, and the objects themselves seem, to a certain extent, to relinquish their wholeness, partially disintegrating into the particularities of their details. Schor claims that one important aspect of the historical discourse on detail and perhaps its “most threatening” is the detail's “tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background” (20).

This claim applies to the passage above, as the unified image of Orlando's country estate gives way to minute details. Such details then become textual ornaments insofar as they do not seem to serve any functional value beyond themselves.

Yet rather than thinking of ornament as superfluous, indulgent, or wasteful—all charges which, as I have discussed, were leveled against ornament at the turn of the century—I would like to suggest, in closing, that there exists another approach toward ornament and excess as evidenced by the above passage. Reading excess, whether thematic excess, as in the case of excessive bodies in *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, or formal excess, as in *Nightwood*'s particularly dragging and circuitous prose, is an exercise in slowing one's pace of reading and directing one's attention to the presence of detail and ornament within the text and what this presence signifies. Through consciously making oneself aware of such textual elements, the very constructed nature of the concept of excess becomes clearer. In the work of Woolf and Barnes, excess is employed strategically as a means of subverting certain elements of male modernist orthodoxy. It is through this recognition of excess as a writing strategy that we can begin to extract or reclaim the notion of excess from dominant modern poetic and aesthetic discourses and reformulate it as a viable modernist literary technique.

As I argued throughout this thesis, a poetics of excess as modernist literary technique in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* relies heavily upon corporeality and materiality in these texts. As opposed to the modernist vision of "the men of 1914," which valorized an austerity of language as a way of effecting a direct treatment of the "thing itself," the bodies *of* the text and the bodies *within* the text are both equally important to writing excess as a textual strategy in the novels of Woolf and Barnes. Through a synthesis of various theories of the body and its materialization in literature—including Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body and Butler's theories of performativity and resignification—I have shown that *Orlando* and *Nightwood* employ different types of bodily excess as a way of engaging in a struggle with modernist representational frameworks and the limits of these frameworks for rendering the experiences of certain individuals. The fact that the critical and creative work of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Lewis tends toward expelling subjectivity and desire in the writing process explains part of this struggle. Desire—a highly personal and intimate desire—pervades the texts of *Orlando* and *Nightwood*. It is the excessive character of such desire—the way in which it always escapes representation, reaching beyond language and its descriptive power—that fuels the

overly detailed and ornamental styles of Woolf and Barnes. As Kaup argues through her conceptualization of the neobaroque in Barnes's work, excessively detailed and ornamental narratives often implicate feelings of loss, uncertainty, insufficiency, and melancholy rather than surplus, elation, or indulgence. Thus, desire and the excessive prose it inspires in *Orlando* and *Nightwood* resist the closed narrative of modernism as a centralized movement consisting of one group of individuals who developed and rehearsed certain experimental and "new" techniques—namely the use of myth and tradition as structure, the adherence to a poetics of impersonality, and the belief in a singular truth to or essence of the poetic object or "thing." Woolf and Barnes demonstrate their own modernist and experimental use of formal excess through extended metaphor, circuitous logic, and a focus on minute "painted" details, multiplying the sources of meaning for their readers and, simultaneously, encouraging these readers to focus their attention on detail and ornament as meaningful aspects of the text. Finally, Woolf and Barnes manipulate time to again reveal the constructed and artificial character of this concept in relation to history and culture, thus challenging the objectivity of history and emphasizing the role that social exclusion has played in its construction. The irony of both *Orlando* and *Nightwood* lies in the fact that the textual elements of these novels that seem the most "anti-modernist" to contemporary readers *are*, in fact, "anti-modernist." Yet the most "anti-modernist" aspects of these two novels are what make them so modern and innovative, even by today's standards—self-aware and deeply critical aspects that must be understood in dialogue with certain elements of male modernist orthodoxy, rather than simply regressive, backward, or even exclusionary.

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