

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ORAL STORYTELLING IN MODERNISM:  
NARRATION, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

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Oral storytellers abound in modernist texts – from T. S. Eliot’s inarticulate J. Alfred Prufrock to Djuna Barnes’ desultory Dr. Matthew O’Connor, from Joseph Conrad’s loquacious Charlie Marlow and other men of the sea to Rebecca West’s dainty Harriet Hume. This project theorizes the construction of orality and the figure of the oral storyteller in early to mid-twentieth-century literature, with a focus primarily – but not exclusively – on the British Isles. While the prevalence of such constructions has been surprisingly under-examined by modern literary critics, early to mid-twentieth-century writers were fascinated with oral storytelling, and this fascination provides vital insight into literary modernism’s all-important efforts to redefine self and community through art and artistic innovation. Modernist authors employ written representations of oral storytelling to explore and attempt to negotiate the relationship between cultural authority and the formation of modern subjectivities.

I examine modernist representations of oral storytelling in works such as Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” (1936), Joseph Conrad’s *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), Rebecca West’s *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* (1929), Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931), and Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958). By exploring how authors contextualize ideas of orality and the oral storyteller within

discourses of nationalism, literary tradition, and technology, I show that the figure of the oral storyteller presents a contact site for the contesting forces that inflect the formulation of self in the early to mid-twentieth-century. These forces include: ideologies of gender and empire; narrative itself as a culturally-inflected schema for understanding experience; and new and recently emergent communication technologies, like the gramophone and radio, which shift early twentieth-century understandings of language, presence, and the limits of the body. Moreover, as inherently self-reflexive moments within texts, scenes of oral storytelling implicitly engage with the defining modernist struggle to both undermine and appropriate the authority of earlier writers and contemporary literary and social traditions. The writers examined in this study use oral storytelling scenes to explore and delineate the relationship between dominant cultural narratives, the material world, and embodied identity.

ORAL STORYTELLING IN MODERNISM:  
NARRATION, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

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**Preface:**  
**Technically Speaking: Orality and Modernism**

*Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question  
To say, "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all" -  
- T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J.  
Alfred Prufrock" (1917)*

T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" presents a peculiar kind of oral storyteller, one that, as far as the reader can see, never actually tells his story at all. As the speaker of the poem, Prufrock relates his fundamental desire to connect with others, to speak and have his intended meaning understood; yet, again and again, he narrates to the brink of performance, imagines himself entering the room where "women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo," but cannot push beyond the first few lines of address (Eliot, "Love" 13-14, 35-36). While the exact nature of the speech act Prufrock anticipates is only hinted at (Is it a proposal? A declaration of love?), it seems from Prufrock's musings – "how should I begin/To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" – that he feels it requires providing an account of himself, a self-narration of sorts (60-61). However, it is also clear from the disjointed flow of Prufrock's dramatic monologue – which, although written, invokes a sense of the oral and aural both through its title as a love *song* and the rhetorical situation of its opening where Prufrock invites the reader (listener?) to join him in walking the city streets – that he cannot articulate this kind of connected narrative, even to himself. This inability is a source of further anxiety.

This emphasis on voice and on speaking one's story is characteristic of what even the briefest of surveys demonstrates to be a widespread, yet unaccounted for, fascination with orality and oral storytelling among early twentieth-century British writers. *Oral Storytelling in Modernism: Narration, Ideology, and Identity* fundamentally claims that a critical focus on such representations opens new avenues of traceable connections among the works of well and lesser-known authors alike. From Eliot's aged, inarticulate Prufrock to Djuna Barnes' desultory Dr. Matthew O'Connor, from Joseph Conrad's loquacious Charlie Marlow and other men of the sea to Rebecca West's dainty, feminine Harriet Hume – oral storytellers abound in modernist texts. Moreover, interest in the spoken word, in what it signifies and how it relates to other modes of expression, can be seen in the proliferation of works that experiment with what might be called "oral-modes" of written narration and the traditional form of the epic.<sup>1</sup> Why are these writers, positioned at or following the beginning of a century in which England achieved what David Vincent calls "full literacy"<sup>2</sup> so fascinated with the spoken word and the tellers of oral tales (Vincent 3)?

This interest in orality exhibited by writers of literature is part of a larger, culture-wide phenomenon. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century saw

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<sup>1</sup> Writers such as Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett, experiment with what might be called "oral-modes" of narration in works such as *The Good Soldier* (1915), *The Waves* (1931), and *Texts for Nothing* (1950-52), which both capitalize on and complicate the division between the spoken and the written word. Early to mid-twentieth-century works that experiment with the oral-based form of the epic include T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (written 1950-52; published 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Vincent's *Literacy and Popular Culture* (1989) is concerned with the cultural impact of the arrival of mass literacy in England, a process that Vincent's research shows took place at an ever-accelerating rate as the twentieth-century approached. Acknowledging the difficulty of establishing clear literacy rates in historical time periods when no official measurement of literacy existed, Vincent bases his assertions on research into marriage records: "In the middle of the eighteenth century, three hundred years after the invention of printing, half the English population could not write. By 1914, over 99 per cent of brides and groom had gained sufficient command over the technology of communication at least to sign the marriage register" (Vincent 1). While Vincent's assertion brings to bear the question of exactly what constitutes "literacy" (does being able to sign one's name make a person literate?), his research does at least provide justification for thinking of the early twentieth-century England as a culture where writing, even at a very basic level, was a predominant practice.

ethnography come into its own as an academic discipline, a sub-field of anthropology in which the study of non-Western societies where the spoken rather than the written word predominated served as a primary interest. In the nineteen-teens Bronislaw Malinowski deployed his research strategy of “participant-observation,” a foundational methodology within ethnographic studies that consists of firsthand field observation, to document in writing the lifestyle and everyday activities of the predominantly oral culture of the Trobriand Islanders.<sup>3</sup> Coming from a different corner of the academy, classicists were also engaged in studying the oral or epic qualities in ancient cultures that fed into their own Western heritage. The so-called “Cambridge Ritualists” published copious studies dedicated to tracing the origins of ancient myths to cyclical rituals and oral performances.<sup>4</sup> The heated debate over whether *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* were orally composed poems led Milman Parry, an American scholar who earned his degree in Paris, to write a thesis connecting the formulation of Homeric epithets to oral composition. This idea influenced later scholars interested in epic cultures including Eric Havelock and Walter Ong. In the 1930’s Parry sought to further strengthen his claims concerning Greek epic composition by traveling to Yugoslavia to create phonograph recordings of traditional Serbo-Croatian oral poetry. The phonograph itself, along with other new and

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<sup>3</sup> For a description and incisive criticism of Malinowski’s methods, see the first chapter of Gregory Castles’ *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (2001), which connects the development of modernism to anthropology and ethnography. For an overview of the interconnections between the rise of anthropology and ethnography as academic disciplines and popular culture in the early twentieth-century, see Jeremy MacClancy’s “Anthropology: ‘The latest form of evening entertainment’” (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The Cambridge Ritualists had close ties to literary modernism, particularly through connections to the Bloomsbury Group. One of the principle and most productive members of the group, Jane Ellen Harrison, was a good friend and mentor of Virginia Woolf. T. S. Eliot acknowledges the inspiration provided by the work of another Cambridge Ritualist, J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, at the beginning of “The Waste Land.” For more information on the Cambridge Ritualists and their connections to literary modernism, see Martha C. Carpentier’s *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (1998) and Robert Ackerman’s *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (1991).

emergent oral/aural communication technologies such as the telephone and radio, doubtlessly also fueled early twentieth-century fascination with the spoken word. After Thomas Edison's 1877 invention of the first mechanism for recording and replaying sound, an article in the *Scientific American* declared, "Speech has become, as it were, immortal" (Johnson 304). As European and American airways became filled with the sound of speech projected via the radio (also, interestingly enough, typically prerecorded, according to BBC policy), scientists, artist-intellectuals, and politicians alike became interested in its potential to draw communities together through the power of voice.<sup>5</sup> Speech also held the key to unlocking the inner world of the unconscious. After the 1909 publication of the first English translation of *Studies on Hysteria*, Sigmund Freud's theories concerning the unconscious, repression, and his so-called "talking-cure" – a name, interestingly enough, coined by the subject of *Studies on Hysteria*, a young woman undergoing treatment named Bertha Pappenheim (pseudonym Anna O.) – were topics of widespread interest, though admittedly not necessarily acceptance, in both British scientific circles and popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

Voice and the spoken word were thus a focus of inquiry and interest across disciplinary divides and the boundaries of so-called high and low culture. This study, however, takes as a starting point the idea that literary representations of orality and

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<sup>5</sup> Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (2006) offers a fascinating account and analysis of the efforts of John Reith, the General Manager of the BBC from 1922 to 1938, to use the BBC to promote a nationally united, conservatively bent agenda, as well as the response by public literary figures such as H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, and some members of the Bloomsbury group.

<sup>6</sup> Anna O. was the patient of Freud's mentor Joseph Breuer, with whom Freud co-wrote *Studies on Hysteria*. For an engaging but broad breakdown of Freud's ideas and their influence on literature and culture, see Henk de Berg's *Freud's Theory and Its Use in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2003). For a more focused and compact analysis of the impact of Freud specifically in Great Britain, see Sally Alexander's "Psychoanalysis in Britain in the Early Twentieth Century: A Introductory Note" (1998).



oral storytelling have something unique to offer among other productions of culture – that the former can provide us with some insight into the latter, just as the reverse is doubtlessly true as well. The literary works of the early to mid-twentieth-century focused upon by this study engage in a simultaneous proffering and reflexive questioning of oral tropes and figures. They present the attempts of certain writers to think through what speech and oral storytellers signify.

This project uses the rather broad definition of oral storytelling as the transmission of narrative by word of mouth, though as we proceed in our exploration certain texts will place pressure on various parts of this basic definition. Eliot’s “Love Song,” is a case in point. Prufrock is an oral performer more in the sense of his attempt to present an account of himself than in successfully doing so. Over the course of this study, we will examine oral storytelling on formal occasions where communities gather for a ritualized narrative performance. We will also consider acts termed by Paul Goetsch as “everyday storytelling,” that is storytelling acts that occur regularly within the course of people’s lives, including “eyewitness accounts, hearsay, gossip, scandal, jokes, stories about personal experience, oft-told biographical anecdotes, stories of self-justification and interpretation” (Goetsch, “Oral” 185). The audience may be a large and public one or, as is the case with Henry James’ innumerable gossips, a small private coterie. The storytelling may have an audience of one.

The stories shared may be realistic or fantastic in nature, and they vary in range of narrativity. On rare occasions, they may be complete narratives in the traditional sense – clearly demarcated with the traditional boundaries of beginning

and end and conveying a sense of movement over the course of what comes between. However, the storytellers we will look at will also often deliver what might be called vignettes, that is short, descriptive accounts of a scene or incident, or what James Phelan calls “portraiture narratives,” sketch narratives that are offered as a means of character development (Phelan, *Experiencing* xii). In most of the storytelling scenes we will explore the oral performers are, to a greater or lesser extent, recognized as such. The uniting factor between all these story performance situations is the presences of bodies desiring to connect via speech and story.

While the prevalence of representations of orality and oral storytelling in works of British modernism is undeniable, to date, no thorough critical study exists exploring modernism’s fascination with them. Current critical work examining such representations within the field of modernist studies tends to be author specific. Scholars interested in understanding the role of orality in the development of the novel or of written literature more generally have also taken interest in modernist representations of oral storytelling, which they present as a node on an overall literary-historical trajectory. While both these kinds of work undeniably have merit, the widespread presence of representations of orality across the works of so many writers during the early- to mid-twentieth-century strongly suggests that larger, horizontal connections within that time period need to be made.<sup>7</sup> My own project examines the construction of orality and the figure of the oral storyteller in early to

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<sup>7</sup> Two of the most recent examples of author-driven studies illustrate my point here. Michael Greaney’s *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (2002) and Alan W. Friedman’s *Party Pieces: Oral Storytelling and Social Performance in Joyce and Beckett* (2007) focus on two authors – Conrad and Beckett – whose works *An Outcast of the Islands* (1897) and *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) constitute the temporal horizons of my project. Both these critics see their respective authors as deeply rooted in their particular cultural moment. My study maps what goes on between them. Notable critical works that map orality in writing across a broader time span include Tony Jackson’s *The Technology of the Novel: Writing and Narrative in British Fiction* (2009), Yael Haveli-Wise’s *Interactive Fictions: Scenes of Storytelling in the Novel* (2003), Garrett Stewart’s *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (1990), and Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *Gossip* (1987).

mid-twentieth-century literature, with a primary, but not exclusive, focus on literature of the British Isles. Representations of orality function as part of a larger modernist aesthetic and provide crucial insight into the modernist project of redefining self and community through art. The modernist authors whose work this project engages use representations of oral storytelling to both explore and attempt to negotiate the relationship between what could be called cultural authority and the formation of modern subjectivities.

Now, a number of the central terms from above are in need of further definition, and will be defined over the course of this study. Here at the outset, I would like to pause briefly to define what I mean by using the term “modernist.” Over the past two decades, the field of Modernist Studies has become increasingly preoccupied with questions of self-definition, specifically the question of what we mean when we refer to “modernism.” Is it a time period? An international cultural movement? Can it be identified with a specific group of authors? By a particular set of formal features?

As Daniel Albright has pointed out, “*Modernism* – like any other unit of critical terminology – is a fiction, but an indispensable one” (Albright viii). In order to make this fiction serviceable, however, it is necessary to provide at least an outline of what it is. For the purpose of this study, I approach “modernism” as a cultural movement, or set of cultural movements, guided by particular kinds of questions or philosophical concerns inspired by the historical conditions of late modernity, including urbanization, technological and scientific innovation, and globalization, which inaugurate a general shared sense that traditional paradigms of knowing and

representing the world and humanity's place within it are no longer adequate and, in fact, may skew or distort our understanding of reality. In a Western context, as Pericles Lewis points out, these paradigms include ways of knowing and representing "developed in the Renaissance, but going back in many ways to the ancient Greeks" (Lewis xviii). In this way, modernism is the locus of a dual crisis – both, as it is commonly called, a "crisis of representation"<sup>8</sup> and a crisis of perception<sup>9</sup> – and is marked by a simultaneous obsession with the past and a feeling of rupture from it. Viewed in this way, Brian McHale's notion of the "epistemological dominant" offers a useful paradigm for thinking about what constitutes modernist concerns. McHale argues that modernist texts explore fundamental questions of how the world can be objectively known, of how experience can be understood and interpreted, and how this information can be communicated from one individual to another (McHale 9). These concerns are often expressed through formal experimentation, in addition to thematic content, and are connected to the impulse to reassess and possibly redefine knowledge and known modes of communication and representation.

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<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive exploration of modernism as a "crisis in representation," see Lewis's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2007).

<sup>9</sup> In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Walter Benjamin touches upon this notion of what I call a "crisis of perception" although he does not label it as such. Benjamin argues that the mode of perception in a given historical time period is tied to the material mode of existence of the people who live in it (222). He sees his own historical moment – the early twentieth-century – as experiencing a shift in perception analogous to that which occurred in the fifth century, and he argues that this shift has its roots in the related phenomena of the increasing significance and political power of the masses, the advent of mechanical reproduction, and the destruction of "aura," the sense of uniqueness attached to an original work of art (Benjamin, "Work" 222-223). Building on Benjamin and the work of Bruno Latour, Sara Danius, in her work *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (2002), argues that modernism can be understood in terms of a "technologically mediated crisis of the senses," an idea that also carries similarities to what I propose here (Danius 1). While I agree with Danius that new technologies dramatically affected how individuals in early twentieth-century Western society perceived the world and their own bodies, I see what I am referring to as the "crisis in perception" as being more expansive, including ideological shifts as well as material ones. Along these lines, my second chapter examines the ways in which an early Conrad text presents and explores the notion that cultural narratives circumscribe perception.

While I see modernism as an international phenomenon not necessarily bound to a narrow time period, my project focuses primarily on the specific historical period of the early to mid-twentieth-century and the location of the British Isles. I take this focus partly for reasons of space – a full reckoning of orality in modernism across all its various figurations is a project more appropriate for a book series than a single dissertation – and continuity. The writers I examine experience the historical circumstances of late modernity in a similar (although by no means the same) fashion. Their work is shaped by and responds to specific shared historical events and social currents, including the decline of previously powerful European empires (especially that of Great Britain), world wars, the rise of fascism, and shifting social relations between the sexes. I would hazard the hypothesis that if we examined representations of orality in the literature of other communities experiencing their modernist moment, we would find some striking similarities as well as differences; however, for the time being that proposition must remain only a hypothesis. While focused primarily on literature of the British Isles, my study includes transnational authors, by which I mean authors who write within the influence of more than one national traditions. In fact, my project is bookended with works that are international in their scope – Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” an essay by a German philosopher that focuses on the work of a Russian author, and Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, a play that engages both British Romanticism and the Irish Literary Revival, which was written by an Irish born artist who lived the majority of his adult life in France. Ultimately, I would propose that any attempt to understand the impulses that lie behind British

modernism, or modernism within any national tradition, requires seeing this tradition within a larger international context.

Over the course of this study, I engage several current trends of interest in the field of Modernist Studies. My project participates in what Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz identify as the general trend of “expansion” (Mao 737). The genealogy I offer by tracing engagements with orality and the oral storyteller begins with a critically neglected text, Conrad’s *Outcast of the Islands*, and places the work of Rebecca West, a writer often left out of narratives of modernism, in a central position. My project also contributes to the growing field of work interested in thinking about early twentieth-century literature in relation to new and emergent communication technologies.<sup>10</sup> While I originally envisioned that technology would be central only to my final chapter, as the technology of the tape recorder plays a central role in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, I found that oral storytelling in modernism is caught up with issues of communication complicated by the emergence of new oral/aural media. Engagement with these technologies plays a larger role in my final two chapters, but it is present as an undercurrent in the earlier ones as well, where it holds potential for future development.

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<sup>10</sup> Mao and Walkowitz also identify this as a trend, connecting the invention of new communication technologies to the spread of modernist ideas globally (Mao 742). Recent works focusing on technology and modernism include the collection *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009) edited by Deborah Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty, Todd Avery’s *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (2006), Sara Danus’s *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (2002), and Tim Armstrong’s *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (1998). As I will explore more thoroughly in my individual chapters, recent critical works have also demonstrated an interest in how technology inflects the writing of particular modernist authors, including Ulrika Maude’s *Beckett, Technology, and the Body* (2009) and the collection *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2000) edited by Pamela L. Caughie.

Lastly, my study contributes to the growing body of works exploring modernism in relation to ethics.<sup>11</sup> These critical works challenge the notion that modernism's focus on consciousness and aesthetics represents an inward turn away from the world of human, social interaction. My project shows that the aesthetic focus of modernists is inevitably caught up in what could be categorized as "ethical" questions, not in terms of providing moral judgment, but in terms of connecting issues of representation – of how one tells a story – to questions fundamental to ethics – of how one delineates the parameters of the self and the relation between self and others. The writers I focus on in my study recognize connections between cultural representations, by which I mean not only "literature" but also narratives of history and popular culture, and individual and social identity, and they question the efficacy of traditional conventions and accepted tropes of representation. The drive to subvert these tropes, to question or consider the possibility of self-definition not bound by accepted contemporary cultural constructions such as gender, race, and/or nation, is the modernist project. While the notion of a kind of modernist "ethical-aesthetic"<sup>12</sup> – that is a distinctly modernist sense of a connection between representation and how an individual understands the self and the self's relation to others – carries the most currency in my chapters on Benjamin and Woolf, each of the writers in this study

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Jessica Berman's *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (2012), Lee Oser's *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas of Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf and Beckett* (2007), and David Ellison's *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (2001).

<sup>12</sup> I use this term here in a slightly different way than Jessica Berman does in her article "Ethical Folds: Ethics, Aesthetics, Woolf" (2004). Her definition is briefly laid out in the introduction to my fourth chapter. In connecting this project to an idea of an "ethical-aesthetic," I am considering "ethics" as an awareness of relation that results from the encounter between self and other. As Laura Doyle points out, the matter of "what's between us?" is a question that is both aesthetic and ethical in nature (Doyle 1-2). Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' idea that ethical thought arises out of the "*face to face*" encounter with the other provides some basis for my approach here (Levinas 39, italics in original).

uses the scene of oral storytelling to investigate the connections between culture, narrative form, and individual and group identity construction in ways that potentially remap contemporary understandings of human relations.

### **On Speech, Writing, and “Not Knowing Greek”: Critical Approaches to the Spoken Word**

Unlike the majority of the texts examined over the course of this project, Virginia Woolf’s essay “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925) does not feature a specific storytelling figure; however, Woolf engages in a consideration of the nature of language and knowledge in this essay that provides an appropriate frame for discussing how criticism generally, and this critical project in particular, approaches literary representations of the spoken word. Woolf’s essay begins with the adamant assertion that “it is vain and foolish” for she and her early twentieth-century British contemporaries “to talk of knowing Greek” (Woolf, “On” 23). For, as she goes on to point out, “we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition” (23).

Although Woolf does not specifically acknowledge the difference, the “Greek” language she is considering here is not that of contemporary Greece, but rather the ancient Greek language of Socrates’ lectures, Plato’s essays, and the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides – that is, the language of classical Greek literature, which was widely studied in British schools in the early twentieth-century and which Woolf herself learned under private tutors. Woolf’s essay goes on to observe how, although they cannot “know” Greek, she and her contemporaries are



obsessed with knowing it, and return to Greek texts again and again in search of answers to questions concerning the deeper meaning of life. Because they can never “know” Greek, however, Woolf observes that they have invented it, and in the end the vision of the ancient Greek world they have come up with much more closely resembles rural England, or rather rural England as she and her contemporaries imagine it existed before the arrival of modernity.

What I want to point out here first is that Woolf’s notion of “knowing” a language, and the Greek language in particular, covers more than just a lexical translation. It encompasses an understanding of context, of what particular concepts or images would have meant to the ancient Greeks themselves. More than this, it seems to encompass an experiential quality – the physical experience of hearing Greek words spoken by the Greeks, either in daily conversation or, as Woolf evocatively describes, in the formal, communal arena of the amphitheater, where “seventeen thousand people perhaps, with ears and eyes eager and attentive, with bodies whose muscles would grow stiff if they sat too long without diversion” watched plays in the hot sun (25). Particularly because she thinks of the ancient Greeks as an oral culture – she writes of them as people who “judged...by ear, sitting out-of-doors at the play or listening to argument in the market-place” – “knowing” Greek less a matter of textual translation and more of a visceral, material, and unobtainable embodied experience (34).

However, despite her repeated assertions that she and her contemporaries can never “know” Greek and her initial move to expose the enormous discrepancy between the nostalgically rustic ideal commonly associated with Greek literature and

the historical Greek world, when she comes to the question – “are we not reading Greek wrongly?” – Woolf balks. She returns to nostalgia, claiming of the Greeks that “They admit us to a vision of the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind” (35). While admitting that this “perhaps, is only an image of reality and not reality itself,” and not losing sight of the fact that she and her readers can’t “know” Greek, Woolf refuses the conclusion that they read “wrongly” (35). Her final lines, in fact, seems to celebrate a further idealized vision of the Greeks as a people who understand, with sadness and acceptance, the ruthlessness of fate and the tragedy of existence. As she writes: “Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure, and it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age” (38).

This final line offers a kind of ambivalent answer to Woolf’s earlier question of reading “wrongly” – one that is both a resounding “yes” and a resounding “no.” For in the end, it seems that although Woolf and her contemporaries can never “know” the Greeks, they can perhaps know something about themselves through a conscious recognition of *how* they read the Greeks (wrongly) and of how their invention of the ancient Greeks answers a need grounded in their own experiences of the modern world, particularly in the wake of the First World War. Recognizing her culture’s (mis)reading of the Greeks, she sees her contemporaries positing in this (mis)reading the potential for society to regain a sense of wholeness out of the fragments of their own broken world.

I have offered this reading of Woolf's "On Not Knowing Greek" because I see Woolf in this essay wrestling with issues of both epistemology and of methodology in terms of how one should approach language in relation to knowledge. In posing this kind of ambivalent answer, Woolf dances a line between two approaches to language that still carry weight in our world today. As Tony Jackson has pointed out, over the course of the past half-century, two major schools of thought have for the most part dominated the methodological approaches of scholars engaged in the study of the spoken word: one school grows out of the work of scholars like Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and Eric Havelock, who focus on the relation between the spoken word and writing as a material technology, and the other is based in the writings of cultural and literary critics and philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes (Jackson, *Technology 2*). We might think of these two schools as the materialist and poststructuralist approaches to orality. While acknowledging that these positions have been developed over time and are inclusive of the works and thoughts of many individuals, for the sake of brevity I will explain these two approaches by focusing on the arguments of two of the most prominent and foundational figures in these movements – Walter Ong and Jacques Derrida.

Materialists see the spoken and written word in terms of a physical and historical relation. They understand writing as a technology, as a tool developed in order to provide a system for visually representing speech. Materialists thus start from the position that concrete differences exist between the spoken and written word and how they are produced and received. In turn, these different means of communication shape the societies that develop and use them and how people within these societies

think. As Ong explains, “Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong 77). One of the major projects of Ong’s book is tracing the shifts that occur as cultures transition from a “primary oral” state, that is a state with no knowledge of writing, to one of the various stages of literacy, including manuscript culture and print culture. For example, Ong argues that thought and expression in primary oral cultures are structured by mnemonic patterns and repetition that facilitate recall, while the introduction of writing allows for a wider variation in the language of thought and expression, since written language does not have to be memorable to be recalled. This variation, along with the ability of writing to be revised and corrected, allows for the development of more complex, higher-level thinking (33-36; 102-107).

Ong and other materialists thus take the physicality of language and its relationship to the body as the starting point for thinking about orality and writing, which they see as related in terms of a linear progression. In comparison, poststructuralists see the spoken and written word as discursively constructed concepts that are part of a larger, all-encompassing system of discourse that constitutes human knowledge and experience. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that Western philosophy is permeated by what he calls “logocentrism,” that is a hierarchization of the spoken word over the written (Derrida, *Of* 3). Writing is considered secondary, an artificial representation of speech, which is primary, natural, authentic, and originary. Much of Derrida’s work is dedicated to exposing and

undermining logocentrism, not by reversing the hierarchy, but by arguing that the very grounds of the privileging of speech, that it precedes writing, is specious. Nothing can be known beyond the linguistic sign we have to represent it; there is no primary, pure speech that writing represents, or, in Derrida's words, "there has never been anything but writing" (Derrida, *Of* 159). In *Dissemination* (1976), Derrida performs what has come to be called a "deconstructive" reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, a philosophical treatise which famously poses Socrates engaging in a debate over the value of writing. Plato (via Socrates) argues that writing is inferior to speech because it is a mere artificial representation of speech and cut off from the presence of the speaker's body. Derrida breaks down the binary concepts upon which Plato's argument is based – natural/artificial, presence/absence, interior/exterior. Speech and writing are, in fact, the apparent constituent parts of yet another binary that Derrida ultimately deconstructs. Language itself is a system that has no definitive origin or signification.

One of the several criticisms leveled at materialists by poststructuralists is that they do not recognize how their understanding of orality, writing, and the relationship between them is itself culturally constructed, is itself discourse. In his work on representations of voice and storytelling in Victorian fiction, Ivan Kreilkamp offers a version of this critique, since he accuses Ong of perpetuating logocentrism himself. Kreilkamp argues that the progression laid out by Ong, where cultures move from primary orality to successive stages of literacy, associates the spoken word with an idealized natural or original state, offering "dubious accounts of a lost oral world, to be mourned and eulogized" (Kreilkamp 206). Kreilkamp sees Ong's work as

illustrative of and contributing to the establishment of mythologies of orality that he believes to be still pervasive today, notions that the shift from orality to writing is “a narrative of the fall from an idealized folk to a degraded mass culture” (1). At the same time, one could also argue that this kind of progression has fed into larger ideological paradigms within literate cultures that primitivize oral communities. Within such paradigms, the association of orality with a state of naturalness makes the oral culture in question at once privileged for lacking the corrupting influence of modernity and looked down upon or infantilized as being at a lower stage of intellectual development. Derrida himself seems to point out how cultural discourses that privilege the oral as more natural can feed into this type of thinking, as he draws a clear connection between his neologism “logocentrism” and the already existing term “ethnocentrism” (Derrida, *Of* 3).

Materialists, on the other hand, often accuse poststructuralists of neglecting to acknowledge the materiality of the body and the physical forms that we encounter language in through their commitment to seeing the world as discursively constructed. Ong presents a version of this kind of criticism when he references Derrida’s *Dissemination* in his own work: “Jacques Derrida has made the point that ‘there is no linguistic sign before writing’ (1976, p. 14). But neither is there a linguistic ‘sign’ after writing if the oral reference of the written text is adverted to. Though it releases unheard-of potentials of the word, a textual, visual representation of a word is not a real word, but a ‘secondary modeling system’ (cf. Lotman 1977)” (Ong 74). This kind critique of poststructuralism in general has gained momentum over the last decade with the rise of what has come to be known as affect theory and

cognitive approaches to narrative theory. Explaining why he favors an approach inspired by Ong and other materialists for his study of how the tension between orality and writing has shaped the development of the novel, Jackson cites scientific research demonstrating that speaking and writing are distinct neurological activities (Jackson, *Technology* 3). He starts from the position that poststructuralist approaches to speech and writing do not adequately account for their physical differences. Jackson thus uses a materially-grounded sense of the difference between spoken and written language to argue that they engender two different kinds of storytelling that are manifest and often in competition within the novel: romanticism and realism.

Because Jackson is a literary scholar, his methods ultimately lead him, like the poststructuralists, to an analysis of discourse, but his starting premises are invested in the materiality of the body and its relation to language. I find it important to draw attention to this overlap, however, because the division between poststructuralist and materialist approaches to orality that I have laid out is admittedly basic. Even scholars like Jackson, who overtly commit themselves to one approach over the other are willing to acknowledge some commonalities between major figures in these camps. I have drawn attention to this division in my preface not to commit this project to one of these two approaches (indeed, I will draw on both at points when it seems appropriate), but because one of the fundamental arguments this study seeks to make is that the grounds of this debate – questions of whether knowledge is constituted by discourse or grounded in the material world, of whether identity and the dimensions of the body itself are determined by ideology or physical law – are central to the concerns of modernists themselves. Particularly as modernists are increasingly

sensing that representation plays a role in not only reflecting but shaping experience, questions such as “What exactly is the line or connection between culture and the material world?” become increasingly more pressing. This is precisely the tension we see Woolf explore in her essay. She claims that she and her contemporaries cannot “know” Greek because they can never share the physical, visceral experience of hearing it spoken in its original context. However, she also recognizes that in the absence of being able to “know” Greek in this physical way, she and her British contemporaries invent it, an observation that at the beginning of her essay seems to carry a critique, but by the end seems to offer a kind of “knowledge” of its own.

The primary purpose of this study is to understand how modernist writers themselves thought of, engaged, and deployed the spoken word. The authors my study focuses on consistently demonstrate an awareness of how orality functions as a cultural signifier within specific contexts, yet they also consistently see the oral storytelling scene as a field of physical encounter, where language and bodies are materially present. While I am informed by both poststructuralist and materialist schools of thought, because I deal primarily with written works, my methodology includes close reading, complemented by historical and biographical contextualization when it elucidates the text at hand. As my project focuses on storytellers, I have found attention to broader points of narrative structure to be useful as well, and occasionally draw on the work of narratologists. Lastly, particularly in my later chapters where I turn to issues of media, I increasingly rely on the work of theorists like Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, Friedrich Kittler, and, to a lesser extent, Bruno Latour, who themselves draw on both poststructuralist and materialist



approaches and challenge the notion that a distinct divide between culture and the material world in fact exists.

### **Oral Storytelling in Modernism: Chapter Outline**

Chapter One is written precisely in this spirit of thinking about how early twentieth-century writers themselves theorized orality. It seeks to provide a contextual and theoretical frame for the chapters that follow by demonstrating the relationship between modernism's ambivalence towards cultural authority and what I am calling the "modernist oral storytelling paradigm." I read Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov" as an illuminating example of this ambivalence. Writing between two world wars fueled by national and ethnic allegiances, Benjamin composed this essay in the shadow of two crumbling European empires – that of a Germany struggling under the sanctions imposed following World War I and of an England watching the sun set on its imperial acquisitions. Although there were obviously some significant differences between Germany and England, certain parties within both nations strove to maintain a coherent sense of identity in the face of dramatic change by positing historical narratives of racial superiority and an idealized but lost national past. Benjamin presents the figure of the pre-modern oral storyteller to explore the question of how stories, both of the past and of the present, can and should be told in the modern world, yet this figure is itself a locus of paradox. Benjamin's vision of the storyteller invokes notions of a utopian pre-industrial past and the primacy of orality over writing, even as he simultaneously draws them into question. The conscious nostalgia

with which Benjamin deploys his pre-modern storyteller opens a view of history as constructed and shifts authority of meaning from tellers to audiences. Ultimately, Benjamin's essay on oral storytelling offers an alternative ethical-aesthetic for how stories should be told in a new technological age of mass communication.

While Chapter One defines the modernist oral storytelling paradigm using the broader international lens of Benjamin's work, Chapter Two harkens back to the early years of British modernism to explore one iteration of this paradigm's development. Taken as a whole, Joseph Conrad's works both reflect and participate in the repositioning of storytelling and the figure of the storyteller within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British cultural consciousness. My second chapter focuses on Conrad's second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), arguing that this neglected work is foundational both within modernism and Conrad's own oeuvre. Chapter Two contextualizes Conrad's engagement with cultural assumptions concerning storytelling, authority, and the spoken word in relation to popular literature of empire in the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century. In particular, I argue that *Outcast* engages in a critique of a dominant figure within literature of empire, which I call the "imperial narrator." This figure's authority arises from concepts of bodily presence and perception and from the idea that the storyteller shares experiences that he has had firsthand. Thus, even when written, this figure invokes the transparency and authenticity of an oral tale. *Outcast* portrays various oral storytellers whose contesting voices destabilize the univocal narrative presented by this kind of figure. Concurrently, Conrad destabilizes the traditional paradigm of storytelling authority through his construction of *Outcast's* third-person limited-omniscient narrator. While

the traditional Victorian narrator offered stable guidance, *Outcast's* narrator consistently undermines its own authority. It asserts romantic and imperialistic tropes familiar to Victorian adventure fiction readers only to debunk them, revealing itself as a narrator at odds with its genre. Conrad's representation of storytellers in *Outcast* expresses anxiety not only about communication, but about the way that pre-existing cultural narratives shape perception. This anxiety precipitates a shift in storyteller authority, a move from the presupposition of transparency and certainty to the assertion of limitations.

Having established this moment of pivotal transition, my next two chapters examine oral storytelling in texts of the late-twenties and early-thirties, delineating two modernist strategies for negotiating authority and seeking alternative modes for understanding and narrating experience: re-plotting and resistance. These texts focus on the relation between the bodies of speakers and listeners, exploring how individuals and groups function within representational scripts that make them readable. For Rebecca West, British novelist, journalist, and advocate for women's rights, tradition itself is this social script, one West sees as both necessary for individuals to formulate a sense of being in the world and potentially harmful as it can perpetuate oppressive cultural narratives. Chapter Three explores West's *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* (1929) as a novel that deploys oral storytelling to present an argument for art's potential to rewrite gender constructions. West's London is a city fundamentally suffused by a complex web of historical, mythological, religious, and literary allusions, which constitute the inheritance of tradition and provide a kind of schema through which its citizens understand themselves and their relations to

others. Within this context, West introduces her readers to her heroine-artist, Harriet Hume, a female oral storyteller who possesses the unique gift of being able to read her male listener's mind. Harriet is at once the storytelling subject and the gendered object of cultural narratives of femininity. The text overtly presents Harriet in terms that invoke archetypes of female oral performance – Scheherazade, the sybil, the siren – and of the feminine more broadly. However, speaking from a position marked by a double awareness of self and self-as-other, Harriet uses her listener's patriarchal expectations to influence him, even as she subtly undermines these expectations and presents the possibility of re-plotting tradition itself.

My fourth chapter explores another modernist text in which a storytelling figure functions to critique the way that stories have been told in the past. However, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) broadens the level on which "story" is engaged, offering a consideration of how the physical media of communication shapes human experience and selfhood. Woolf's complex engagement with orality works on several levels simultaneously in *The Waves*. The text employs a markedly oral mode of narration to relate the lives of six friends from youth to old age, a mode that defies traditional conventions of how speech is incorporated and presented in the genre of the novel and creates what I call "unnatural oral storytelling." At the same time, Woolf's portrayal of the character Bernard, an aspiring novelist and skilled oral storyteller, highlights how stories – as culturally determined patterns of both content and form – fundamentally constitute the self's physical, psychological, and temporal boundaries. Bernard tells stories to order his experiences and establish a coherent identity; yet his story-making impulse often encounters resistance in the form of

criticism from others and in moments when Bernard's own doubts arrest his narration. These points of resistance highlight Woolf's critique of Edwardian realism and emphasize her own attempts to imagine story and, in turn, the self differently. This kind of self-reflexivity, paired with Woolf's defamiliarized, oral-mode of narration, which incorporates both past and newly emergent oral/aural media, creates a unique reading experience that highlights the omnipresence and, paradoxically, the immediacy, of mediation.

Modernist interest in the development of oral/aural communication technologies is a topic worthy of its own study. In the "Hades" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Leopold Bloom imagines what seems to be a uniquely modern way of remembering the dead: "Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on Sunday. Put on old greatgrandfather. Kraahaark! Hellohellohello" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 93). Bloom's daydream about listening to the recorded voices of the dead opens up into fundamental questions about the relationship among voice, the body, and what might be called self-presence, a relationship that oral/aural technology reconfigures. My fifth and final chapter moves beyond the genre of the novel to consider how Samuel Beckett explores such questions in his play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). This play presents the audience with a unique kind of storytelling scene, where a self-narration is produced through the joint storytelling of a physically present and embodied old man, Krapp, and a tape recorder replaying narrations dictated by Krapp's younger self. Beckett's deployment of this kind of "mechanical orality" undermines notions of authenticity, transparency, and authority typically associated with the spoken word. I further trace a genealogy of these notions leading

back to British Romanticism and the Irish Literary Revival, as well as forward to contemporary discourses surrounding emergent sound technologies. Beckett draws attention to the role that media play in shaping human understanding of selfhood. He challenges not only the authority of the spoken word, but the stability of the subject that speaks and listens. By presenting the audience with a storytelling subject of uncertain coherence, who is at once fragmented and networked, Beckett's play anticipates a postmodern formulation of subjectivity.

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## **Chapter 1** **Authority and the Modernist Oral Storytelling Paradigm**

*“The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”*  
-Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”  
(1936)

To a certain degree, written representations of oral storytelling scenes invoke a sense of the “spectral,” in the most common meaning of the term. Always a kind of repetition, the written storytelling scene is a representation of a daily human activity that is tied to the corporeality of the body, and yet is itself markedly disembodied. We recognize the storytelling scene as a marker of presence, an acknowledgement of the role that speakers and listeners play in the transmission of story. However, these kinds of bodies are palpably not present for the reader. When considered from this perspective, written representations of oral storytelling highlight the absence of actual bodies from the storytelling scene and, in turn, the distance between the writer and her reading audience.

Certainly, modernist representations of voice could be said to be spectral in this way. The concept of voice itself presents a kind of simultaneous embodiment, as it usually implies a speaking body, and disembodiment, as it always takes place in the space beyond and between bodies. Famous modernist representations of voice tend to highlight the way that literature traditionally posits itself as offering profound insight into the depths of lived experience, and yet also constantly remind the reader that reading is itself not a transparent act, that certain aspects of the experience read about remain inaccessible through language or, as some modernists might argue, any representational form. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for example, the protagonist Charlie Marlow is driven to continue his journey into the Congo by his

intense desire to hear Kurtz's voice – not for the sake of the content of what Kurtz has to say but because he senses that the act of hearing Kurtz's speech itself contains a kind of inexpressible but profound knowledge. Tied to Marlow through his first-person narration, the reader shares in this desire, yet the actual sound of Kurtz's voice is the one aspect of his speech that remains forever inaccessible to the reader.

Similarly, the cave scene in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and the scene where Peter Walsh encounters an old beggar woman near a London tube stop in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) both feature the description of a voice, or in Forster's case, an echo that could be a voice, which contains a profound kind of primeval knowledge. However, once again, while the existence and, perhaps to a certain degree, an understanding, of this knowledge can be communicated to the reader, the experience of the medium, of the sound itself, is beyond reach. Voice, or sound, in these texts is highlighted as a powerful presence as well as an acute absence, which simultaneously offers and denies insight.

However, the modernist storytelling scene is spectral for a reason beyond the presence/absence of storytelling bodies and voices. Rather, with a nod to my epigraph by Walter Benjamin, I hold that the storytelling scene presents an encounter with an other that is also an encounter with the self, that offers the opportunity for insight into how the borders between self and other are constituted. There is something uniquely spectral about the figure of the modernist oral storyteller, and this spectrality both indicates and directly grows out of a deep ambivalence within the modernist project. This ambivalence is tied to questions concerning narrative form, literary and cultural

representation, and authority – a matrix of obsessions all of which meet in the oral storytelling scene.

To make this argument, I will begin in the first section of this chapter by establishing modernism in the early twentieth century as a movement defined by its deep ambivalence towards cultural authority. The modernist project of questioning and seeking to redefine traditional modes of representation by its very nature includes a rejection of the cultural authorities that deployed and legitimized these modes. In this way, modernists were faced with the challenge of overthrowing previous cultural authorities, a challenge that required to a certain extent the preemptive co-opting of the power these authorities possessed, and yet, in order to be successful, must avoid duplicating the power structures they seek to overthrow. The degree of success that modernists demonstrated in achieving this goal has long been the subject of certain postmodernist critiques of modernist authors. Writing from what she calls “our postmodern perspective,” Bette London offers a series of readings demonstrating the inability of modernists to avoid reproducing the very power structures they seek to undermine (London 2). London’s evaluation of modernism as a movement that “participates in and responds to a crisis in cultural authority and narrative legitimacy” has much in common with my own argument here, although I would not limit the awareness of this cultural crisis to a postmodern position (2). That modernists chose to struggle with the problematic of authority with varying degrees of awareness is exactly the point of ambivalence that both haunts and defines the modernist project.

As moments within the text that are inherently self-reflexive, scenes of oral storytelling engage with this struggle. Thus after explaining more fully modernism’s

deep ambivalence towards cultural authority, in the second section of this chapter I relate this ambivalence to my definition of what I call the modernist oral storytelling paradigm. I both connect and differentiate this paradigm from its predecessor in what can be loosely called the British tradition. Lastly, in the remaining sections of this chapter, I show how this paradigm is reflected in the work of early twentieth-century literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, arguing that his essay “The Storyteller” presents a distinctly modernist aesthetic, one that ties into modernism’s ambivalence towards authority and invokes a sense of the spectral. The modernist oral storytelling paradigm is always a site of multiple and even mutual hauntings. It reveals modernism itself as haunted by a phantasm of authority that it can neither exorcise nor embrace.

### **Questioning Authority: Modernism’s Ambivalent Imperative**

Modernism is a movement that is defined, troubled, and – in a strange way – invigorated by a deep ambivalence towards cultural authority. Of course, “cultural authority” is a broad and admittedly vague term. The exact dimensions of this term vary from writer to writer. For Woolf, it is the Edwardian “materialists;” for T. S. Eliot, it is the philistine middle class; for Rebecca West, it is Eliot himself. The constant factor between these writers is the apparent need to position themselves in relation to both previous traditions as well as contemporary forms of literary representation. As Michael Levenson has recently observed, the dictum “make it new” signifies a competition for prominence that takes place on both vertical and horizontal temporal planes. It indicates a desire to break with the past, but also

initiates an ongoing competition within the present, a “*competition of novelties*” as various manifestations of ‘newness’ vie for attention and influence (Levenson 5, italics in original). In my discussion of Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” later in this chapter, as well as in each of the subsequent chapters of this study, I specifically delineate the nature and form of cultural authority that the writer in question is negotiating. In this particular section, however, I want first to discuss “authority” and its relationship to modernism on a more general level. Establishing one’s own authority for modernists, and for the modernist writers I focus on in particular, is a kind of slight-of-hand process, one that is perpetually ongoing. I argue that the scene of oral storytelling is a particularly potent site in which this kind of continuous working through of authority takes place.

Literary critics have cited various causes for modernism’s complicated relationship with authority, including economic, political, and social factors as well as issues of aesthetics. As Mark Conroy points out, writers in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries faced a specific kind of crisis in authority caused by the widening gap between writers and their reading audience. Brought about by the rise of middle-class readership and the development of the consumer print industry over the course of the previous hundred years, this gap was both physical and ideological. As readership grew in terms of actual numbers, writers faced an increasingly distant and faceless audience who must be reached and whose expectations to a certain degree must be met, even if these expectations diverged from the artist’s own agenda

(Conroy 3-5).<sup>13</sup> Social and political factors, working in tandem with economic ones, played a role in shaping modernism's ambivalent stance towards cultural authority as well. Marianne DeKoven argues that new modernist aesthetic forms evolved in response to and, at times, as a means of representing, early twentieth-century socialist and feminist movements and the social unrest which both sparked and resulted from their development (DeKoven 4). Focusing on how issues of authority are worked out through the specific convention of voice within modernist texts, London positions the three modernists she examines – Conrad, Forster, and Woolf – as each responding to an author-specific source of anxiety over authority caused by their positions as, respectively, an international, a self-proclaimed denationalized, and a feminine “outsider” subject (London 10).

Certainly, these explanations of modernism's anxious relationship with authority are not mutually exclusive. Of more importance to the point I want to make here are the results of this so-called crisis. One claim that each of these arguments share in common is that the actions taken to establish authority never alleviate the anxiety which caused modernists to seek to establish their authority in the first place. For Conroy, modernist efforts to establish their own authority lead to ambivalence and anxiety because the process of claiming authority itself leads into a kind of circular argument. As Conroy explains, “A given source of authority must always be posited, enunciated into being, and yet it is always posited as prior (a kind of metalepsis)” (Conroy 21-22). To claim authority, one must assume one has the authority to make this claim. DeKoven sees modernists as held back by the standards

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<sup>13</sup> Conroy sees the proliferation of prefaces around the turn of the century as evidence of the modernist desire to bridge this gap (Conroy 38). One could argue that the explosion of the genre of the manifesto in the early twentieth-century served a similar purpose.

of bourgeois patriarchy, even as they strive to overthrow this system. This creates, according to DeKoven, an “irresolvable ambivalence,” consisting of “fear and desire in equal portion” (DeKoven 20). Likewise, London sees the modernists she focuses on as trapped in contradiction – yearning to wrest authority from previous systems and yet inevitably repeating the premises and strategies by which these systems lay claim to dominance (London 2-5). Modernists, in all these formulations, are in a peculiar state of what might be called “working through” - a process where authority is constantly and simultaneously undermined, shuffled, and asserted.

For modernists, the oral storytelling scene offered a particularly potent and promising site in which this perpetual “working through” might occur for a number of reasons. As I mentioned in the Preface preceding this chapter, the oral storytelling scene is one of encounter between culture, or discourse, and the material world. It offers writers the opportunity to explore connections between culture, narrative form, and both individual and group identity construction. Because oral storytelling situations feature a (textually) embodied speaker and audience, they can offer a particularly self-reflexive environment for authors to explore and critique traditional sources of authority within their culture. Writers and, in turn, readers, can judge and take stock of not only the content of the story told but of who is speaking it and to whom. This dynamic is precisely why a character like Conrad’s Charlie Marlow continues to fascinate us on so many levels. Marlow famously pronounces “Lord” Jim to be “one of us” despite (or perhaps because of) his failure to respond as the heroic man of action portrayed in the romantic stories of his youth and promoted by the collective self-image of the British empire. As several early reviewers caught on,

as “one of us,” Jim’s failures, as well as his eventual redemptive heroism, are shared by Marlow’s listeners and, in turn, Conrad’s reading audience. Yet to follow this line of thought further, in pronouncing Jim as “one of us,” Marlow too is laying claim to camaraderie with listeners and readers. Any critique of Marlow then (and certainly, even from the very year of *Lord Jim*’s publication, there were critics<sup>14</sup>), leads to the possibility of readers enacting, and hopefully realizing, a self-critique. Marlow’s unspoken claim to be “one of us” is part of what establishes his authority to tell Jim’s story to his British audience. In order to accept Marlow’s tale, then, this audience is faced with questions of what it mean to be “one of us,” what authorizes an individual to speak on behalf of this group, and whether Marlow fit this bill.

The scene of oral storytelling also provides a vehicle through which modernist writers can attempt to work through a particular, central contradiction in their own aesthetic, one that is intimately connected to claims of authority made by certain modernists. Modernism is a movement marked by a simultaneous drives towards representational transparency and opacity, or, to use the terms of new media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s, “immediacy” and “hypermediacy” (Bolter 30-31). Desiring to create an authentic representation of subjective experience, to convey, as Woolf describes in one of her letters, “[a] mind thinking...life itself going on,” modernist writers aim to transcend their medium and provide readers direct access to the experience represented (Woolf, *Diary Three* 229). For modernists like Woolf, it is this desire for transparence, to make direct experience accessible, that sets her generation of artists apart from the previous one, the generation of the Edwardian

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<sup>14</sup> One anonymous reviewer, for example, from the November 1900 issue of *The Sketch* finds Marlow a “tiresome, garrulous, philosophizing old bore” (Sherry 118).



“materialists” who Woolf critiques in her essays “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) and “Modern Fiction” (1925) for being so concerned with physical description and novelistic convention – the demand “to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest and an air of probability” – that they completely fail to represent life as it really is (Woolf, “Modern” 149). In comparison, writers of the new generation, of whom Woolf chooses Joyce as exemplary, attempt to convey life as it is experienced, as “myriad impressions” perceived by the mind (150).

Yet at the same time, perhaps because of their struggle to transcend mediation, modernist artists are constantly drawing attention to the mechanics and medium involved in the act of representation itself. Focusing on the visual art, Bolter and Grusin argue that modernist efforts to fracture the space of a work of art, specifically for Bolter and Grusin through the use of collage and photomontage, leads to “a hyperconscious recognition or acknowledgement of the medium” (Bolter 38). Quoting Clement Greenberg, they claim “Modernism used art to call attention to art” (qtd. 38). Rather than seeking to transcend the medium to provide direct access to the experience represented, such art seeks to highlight the experience of the artistic medium itself. In literature, this same impulse can be seen in the proliferation of representations of artist and writer figures who carry out metatextual debates concerning the purpose and efficacy of art, and often of literature specifically, from Woolf’s painter Lily Briscoe to writer-characters like James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Dorothy Richardson’s Miriam Henderson, and Samuel Beckett’s Molloy.

As depictions of the act of telling a story, literary representations of oral storytelling scenes present a particularly lucid site for understanding this

simultaneous drive towards representational transparency and opacity. In contrast to the omniscient third person narrator, situations of oral storytelling feature a fully embodied, fully fallible first-person speaker. Tying narration to a speaker is thus a move towards the prized modernist ideal of conveying a more authentic representation of subjective experience, of ultimately transcending the limits of representation to provide readers insight into the nature of reality. This attempt at authenticity itself translates into a kind of authority, even as it sacrifices the authority of omniscience. However, at the same time that oral storytelling situations strive towards transparency, by bypassing the inauthentic convention of the omniscient narrator, they can also draw attention to storytelling itself as a form of mediation, by highlighting the process by which stories are constructed and communicated.

Lastly, oral storytelling situations also offer the opportunity to interrogate the connection between authority and the medium of communication. This includes not only language as a medium, but also the different means by which we produce and access language – the spoken word, the written word, and even the mechanically recorded or replayed word. The authority of a medium is culturally determined. As Walter Ong has pointed out, in most modern literate societies, writing takes precedence over the spoken words in matters of business and legality. One may speak a promise, but it is only once it is written down that words become legally binding in a court of law. In comparison, in early modern society, where literacy was still developing rather than widespread, eye witness reports carried more weight than sworn written statements, as the speaker would be present as a body to verify the truth of his words while the writer may not be (Ong 95-96). Particularly when presented

alongside or in juxtaposition with other mediums of storytelling, literary representations of oral storytelling pursue questions of the origin and validity of such cultural biases. For modernists the urgency of these kinds of questions is heightened by the growing influx of new communication technologies that became available over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.

### **Speaking Authority: The Modernist Oral Storytelling Paradigm**

Literary representations of oral storytellers or oral storytelling situations do not begin with modernism. That tradition, as Yael Halevi-Wise points out in her work *Interactive Fictions: Scenes of Storytelling in the Novel* (2003), is evident in some of the earliest manifestations of the novel, including the stories exchanged by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (Haveli-Wise 21-49). What I want to argue here, though, is that in modernism, the oral storytelling figure occupies a particularly rich and troubled space, where issues of authority that are so central to the modernist project can be consciously, or unconsciously, explored.

In this section, I want to juxtapose two types of storytelling figures, what I am calling the realist storyteller and the modernist storyteller. These two figures, in turn, belong to two different storytelling paradigms, which reflect two different aesthetics. In designating these two paradigms, I aim not to set out a strict criteria that all storytelling situations must fall into in order to be characterized, but rather to lay out certain sets of connected issues – authorial and narrative authority, the binary of speech/writing, the relationship between author and reader – that I see a noteworthy number of texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-centuries engaging

with. Neither of these paradigms is intended to be bound exclusively to a particular historical period or novelistic genre. The realist storytelling paradigm, like romance or the realist tradition, was not ended by the advent of modernism, and certainly continues to be a presence within literature and culture today. Moreover, rather than presenting these two paradigms as opposites, I would like to stress their continuities as well as differences. I see the modernist paradigm as something that grows out of, rather than being opposed to, the realist one. Below I briefly outline some of the characteristics of the realist oral storytelling paradigm alongside some characteristics of the modernist one. Establishing the parameters of the latter is one of the ongoing goals of this project, and I will return to and further develop the definition begun here in subsequent chapters.

Realist oral storytelling situations serve as a mimetic device used to enhance the emotional impact or plausibility of either the story being told or the overarching frame narrative within which the storytelling scene is embedded. A tactic of what Paul Goetsch calls “social realism” (Goetsch, “Oral” 185), they gain their power from the ‘authority’ of the speaker, by which I mean the speaker’s personal ethos or his or her own appeal based on association with accepted tropes of characterization. Walter Scott’s tale of Wandering Willie, embedded within the historical novel *Redgauntlet* (1824), provides an illustrative example of this kind of use. Encountered by the novel’s protagonist, Darsie Latimer, as he travels the borderlands between Scotland and England, Willie clearly a “type.” Blind and skilled at playing the fiddle, Willie belongs to the class of peasants who inhabit these borderlands. He is also regarded as a consummate teller of tales, and, indeed, the tale he shares with Darsie offers a kind

of folk wisdom – specifically the moral that one should not trust the appearances of strangers. While Darsie at first appears bemused by Willie’s offer of a tale, he is clearly impressed by the artful artlessness of its telling, and attempts to preserve the genuineness of the tale by transcribing it word for word. As he writes to Alan Fairford, his friend to whom the letter we are reading is addressed, “I will not spare you a syllable of it, although it be of the longest; so I make a dash – and begin” (W. Scott 86). Scott himself earned high praise for his supposedly realistic portrayal of Willie, particularly for his rendering of Willie’s Scottish dialect.<sup>15</sup>

Another way that the realist storytelling paradigm establishes the ‘authority’ of its speaker is by privileging the oral word above the written. The spoken word, and therefore, oral stories, are presented as a more direct and immediate form of communication than the written. Oral storytellers are thus more connected to their audience. They are more in tune with the primitive or natural side of human nature, and are thus retainers of ancient wisdom (Kreilkamp 4-6; Goetsch, “Oral” 199). This kind of ‘authority’ is based in a sense of linear time, and often expresses anxiety that the present is in some ways inferior to the past. Once again, Scott’s Wandering Willie provides us with a prime example, for not only is Willie himself a quintessential representative of Scottish folk culture, but the story he tells poses a kind of opposition between speech-culture and writing. Writing itself is a malevolent presence in Willie’s tale, associated with economic oppression and a shift away from the

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<sup>15</sup> Overall, the reviews of *Redgauntlet* were mixed, but “Wander Willie’s Tale” in particular drew positive attention. The reviewer in *The London Literary Gazette*, for example, hailed Willie as one of Scott’s finest characters (at the time, Scott published the book anonymously, although his name was commonly associated with the work), and called Willie’s tale, with an obvious nod to the speaker’s Scottish dialect, one of the best “auld world stories” produced (385). The reviewer writing for the *Westminster Review* is on the whole extremely critical of *Redgauntlet*, which he (or she) found to be overly contrived and tedious, both on the level of plot and form; one of the few positive exceptions to this critique is Wandering Willie and his tale, which the reviewer calls “decidedly the best thing in the book” (186).

traditional relations of old world rural communities. At the center of Willie's tale and of the troubles of its protagonist, Willie's grandsire Steenie Steenson, is a written document, a receipt verifying that Steenie paid his rent to his landlord, Sir Robert Redgauntlet, that was lost when the latter died suddenly just after receiving Steenie's payment. Redgauntlet's heir, his estranged son, Sir John, who has been living away from the estate in the city, refuses to accept Steenie's word that he has paid his rent. Faced with a rental-book that lists him as remiss in his payment, which Steenie regards as "a mastiff-dog that he was afraid would spring and bite him," Steenie is left no alternative but to undertake a trip to Hell to find old Redgauntlet and retrieve his receipt (W. Scott 92). While the retrieval of this receipt helps to set things right, in the end Willie's story emphasizes the power of the spoken word. The new Lord Redgauntlet ultimately lowers Steenie's future rent, as an incentive to inspire Steenie to "hold [his] tongue" and not spread the story of the elder Redgauntlet's current residence amongst the damned, a promise that although Steenie agrees to, he obviously does not keep. The oral tale, and specifically the oral tale that Willie has just related, thus exercises a kind of lasting power.

Lastly, realist storytelling situations model communities of speakers and listeners that can provide a reader with guidance as to how a story should be interpreted. Such communities also can help bridge the gap between a writer and his or her reader. Emily Brontë's Gothic novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) provides another brief but illustrative example here. Like the narrator Mr. Lockwood, whose written record we are ostensibly reading, the readers of *Wuthering Heights* are outsiders to the community that the novel focuses on. We thus share the position of

Lockwood as he listens at length to the spoken narrative of the insider, Ellen Dean, as she recounts this community's history. Lockwood's curiosity about and responses to Ellen Dean's stories guide our own, just as Ellen's commentary on how both her story and herself as its teller are perceived could be seen as equally aimed at Lockwood and the reader. Ellen, for example, resists Lockwood's impulse to nostalgically idealize the rural community in which the story takes place, commenting, "Oh! here we are the same as anywhere else, when you get to know us" (Brontë 57).

As noted earlier, the modernist storytelling paradigm grows out of the realist one, and some of the same characteristics may be constant between the two. However, the shifts I see between them reflect the modernists' complicated position towards authority. While the modernist storytelling paradigm may still nod towards social realism by presenting a familiar, everyday storytelling scene, these kinds of storytelling situations undermine claims to the singular authority of the storyteller by consciously reminding listeners/readers of the constructed nature of the story they are hearing/reading. In doing so, they undermine the idea that there is a single way to tell a story. By making evident the mechanics of storytelling, they also invite the reader/listener to consider how culturally determined tropes and conventions of storytelling shape their understanding of their own lives and experiences. In this way, narratives of identity and of history are destabilized, blurring the line between what is considered genuine 'fact' and constructed 'fiction'.

This kind of destabilization can be understood in relation to Hayden White's concept of "emplotment," a concept we will explore more closely in the fourth chapter of this study, which examines Woolf's *The Waves*. "Emplotment" is

grounded in the idea that while historical discourse lays claim to transparency, it presents past events through culturally recognized narrative framework (comedy, tragedy, romance) – and his argument that the division between figurative and literal language is an arbitrary one (H. White, “Historical” 193-196). Indeed, White himself sees modernism, as a movement which fractures our confidence in our ability to consider an event as a stable object, as particularly revealing of the arbitrariness of this distinction (H. White, *Figural* 66-67). Feminist narrative theorists like Nancy Miller and Rachel Blau DuPlessis have demonstrated more specifically how literary and cultural narratives can play a role in shaping individual identities. In *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), DuPlessis argues for a parallel between the two variations of ending available to women in traditional romance novels – marriage and death – and the way that women’s lives and sense of self have historically been circumscribed by their value and position within a heterosexual relationship. Modernist storytelling situations expose these parallels by drawing attention to the way that literary precedents shape how we interpret and communicate our daily experiences.

The modernist storytelling paradigm’s also undermine ideas of authority that are based on a binary that privileges the spoken word as a more direct, unmediated, and immediate form of communication than the written. In his work *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005), Ivan Kreilkamp argues that the privileging of voice in modern criticism is a mythology that began with what he calls “the Victorian Storyteller,” which he attempts to expose. I argue that modernists identified and struggled with this myth nearly one-hundred years ago, and often engaged in projects of exposure similar to Kreilkamp’s own. Joyce, for example, in the first chapter of



*Ulysses* (1922), draws attention to and mocks the figure of the mythic Irish poet-bard through his depiction of Buck Mulligan, and demonstrates how these kinds of figures are involved in perpetuating historical narratives that promote the British colonial enterprise in Ireland – an idea that, as we shall see in the fifth chapter of this study, Beckett picks up upon several decades later. In general, the ways in which a particular storytelling situation goes about undermining this privileging, or the binary upon which this privileging is based, vary. My project is particularly interested in looking at the way that bodies, or the presence of storytellers and listeners, function within modernist storytelling situations to highlight the omnipresence of acts of reading in order to undermine the myth that one could have a direct storytelling interaction free from the mediating presence of culture.

Lastly, like the realist paradigm, modernist storytelling situations may also present a community of speakers and listeners as a way to encourage readers to reflect upon their relationship to the writer, yet this community does not necessarily function to make the reader feel more connected with the author, speaker, or story. Instead, these communities tend to highlight the problematics of communication, in speech and as well as in writing. Rebecca West's *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* (1929), which I will discuss in more depth in Chapter Three, provides a particularly lucid example of modernist storytelling situations that highlights this kind of problematic communication. Indeed, *Harriet Hume* is explicitly *about* problematic communication in a way that *Wuthering Heights*, even with Ellen Dean's corrective commentary to Lockwood, is not. The several storytelling scenes that take place between West's two main characters, Harriet and her one time lover, the ambitious

politician Arnold Condorex, hinge upon a failure in communication, an inability for Harriet to communicate and for Condorex to properly interpret her stories. This failure is made all the more poignant by the fact that Harriet can in fact read Condorex's mind. As I will argue over the next several chapters, answering this question leads us into a consideration not only of the conventions of storytelling but also of the role that the act of "reading" plays even in oral storytelling situations when bodies are marked by cultural narratives of gender and class.

### **Past Authority: Benjamin's Spectral Storyteller and the Nostalgic Future**

I begin this project by examining Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller" with full awareness that this choice may raise more than a few skeptical eyebrows. At first glance, it may seem strange that one of the first texts I discuss in a project on representations of orality in *British* modernism should be an essay by the German cultural and literary critic Walter Benjamin. Yet, as the existing substantial body of scholarship on Benjamin clearly shows, Benjamin's influence reaches far beyond the borders of Germany. "The Storyteller" is itself an essay that takes an international scope. While it ostensibly focuses on the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, it also mentions writers such as Rudyard Kipling and R. L. Stevenson (British), Edgar Allan Poe (American), Paul Valéry and Gustave Flaubert (French), and Johann Peter Hebel (German), to name just a few. Moreover, "The Storyteller," in particular, has long been cited and discussed by literary critics concerned with the art and

representation of storytelling in the Western tradition in general and in the tradition of modernism specifically.<sup>16</sup>

Putting the work of these critics aside for the moment, however, the writings of Walter Benjamin, and “The Storyteller” in particular, present an appropriate starting point for my project because both Benjamin and the modernists I discuss in the following chapters share a common ambition of interrogating traditional hierarchies of authority, including the hierarchy that governs reader-writer relationships, and dominant, widely-accepted narratives of identity and history, especially those narratives that lay claim to a status of singular truth or fact. Despite the fact that Germany and England faced each other as central figures on opposing sides in the First World War and, near mid-century, once again in World War II, these two nations held much in common during the early twentieth-century. For both Germany and England, these years were overshadowed by crumbling dreams of empire. Germany had recently seen its own ambitions of empire and its place as a world power ended with the loss of World War I and the heavy social and economic restrictions imposed as part of the Treaty of Versailles. England, in comparison, was increasingly recognizing its inability to maintain a hold on its colonies abroad, while at the same time keeping a fearful eye on political developments on the European continent, particularly the growing influence of Fascism. England’s own place as a world power was increasingly insecure. Parties in both nations responded to these situations by positing nostalgic historical narratives of racial superiority and an

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<sup>16</sup> See Peter Brooks’ *Reading for Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984) and Edward Said’s essay “Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative” (1974) for two of the most well known discussions of “The Storyteller” in relation to modernism. Other studies that focus on Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” in the context of modernism include Michael Greaney’s *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (2002), Ann Martin’s *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in Bed: Modernism’s Fairy Tales* (2000), and Mark Conroy’s *Modernism and Authority: Strategies of Legitimation in Flaubert and Conrad* (1985).

idealized but lost national past. In the 1930s, Germany saw Hitler and the Nazi party rise to power, yet as Woolf points out in *Three Guineas* (1938), England was home as well to insidious and dangerous nationalist narratives. Woolf connects the figure of the German or Italian Fascist dictator, so feared and rallied against by the general British populace, to patriarchal social and economic structures of British society that oppress women and to the development of a virulent patriotism within England that refused to question the status quo.

From this perspective, one might say that Benjamin and many of the British modernists engaged in this study are haunted by the same ghosts – figures of authority, origin, and history – which they wish to undermine and yet, to a certain extent, must appropriate the power of in order to pursue this goal.<sup>17</sup> I begin this project on modernist representations of oral storytelling by examining Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” because this essay in particular demonstrates the connection between these cultural ideologies and both the act and the means of telling stories. My focus on Benjamin’s essay is not to imply that he provides an exact template for what I am calling the modernist storytelling paradigm, or that the storytelling figures I discuss in subsequent chapters will all fit Benjamin’s description of the pre-modern oral storyteller or even the figure of Nikolai Leskov, whom Benjamin considers the modern incarnation of this earlier figure. Rather, I see Benjamin’s essay as an appropriate point of departure because it explores the above concerns through an examination of certain sets of issues we will see again and again in modernist storytelling situations – the relationships between readers, writers, and texts; the

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<sup>17</sup> I am not the first to detect in Benjamin’s work a sense of haunting. Gerhard Richter’s *Benjamin’s Ghosts* (2002) contains a collection of essays exploring the variety of ways “ghosts” are encountered in Benjamin’s work.

binary between orality and writing; and the limitations and potential of new mass communication technologies. Benjamin's essay not only makes explicit the kinds of issues struggled with within the modernist storytelling paradigm, but perhaps more importantly it also makes evident in its many contradictions the ambivalence that lies at the heart of the modernist storytelling enterprise and ultimately defines modernism as a movement. It is these contradictions that I want to draw out here to open up this essay of Benjamin's to a new reading.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" is a seminal work for literary critics interested in representations of storytelling, particularly oral storytelling, in modernist fiction. Categorizing oral storytelling as an economy based on the exchange of personal experience, Benjamin bemoans its fading presence in modern culture. Benjamin sees this decline as both caused by and enmeshed within specific material, historical, economic, and cultural factors. He claims the disappearance of this figure from the daily life of the modern individual is symptomatic of the growing inability of human beings to communicate directly with each other in a world in which they are increasingly dependent on technology. Moreover, Benjamin sees the inability of returning World War I veterans to talk about their experience as a clear indication of a process that has long been underway – namely that modernization has made humanity "poorer in experience" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 84). As Benjamin explains, "never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power" (84). Benjamin juxtaposes this decline of humanity's ability to understand and communicate

experience through oral storytelling directly with the rise of the novel, which he sees as the “earliest symptom” of orality’s demise, as well as other emergent forms of media favored by the middle class, such as the newspaper, (87).

With a nod to such claims by Benjamin, literary critics often present him as expressing what they see as a characteristically modern anxiety over the potential loss of humanity that accompanies widespread urbanization and the growth of technology. Ann Martin, in her work on modernism and fairytales, references “The Storyteller” in order to support her claim that fairytales hold a particular significance in modernism, because the roots of fairytales lie in an oral storytelling tradition implicitly connected to rural communities, a space free from the anxiety and alienation of the urban mass (Martin 5). In his investigation of representations of oral storytelling in the work of Joseph Conrad, Michael Greaney uses Benjamin’s essay to support his claim that modernist writers such as Conrad had an ambivalent relationship with their medium, as they privileged the spoken word and oral storytelling above writing as a more thoroughly authentic form of interpersonal communication (Greaney 17-19). Both these readings see Benjamin’s text as privileging oral storytelling in opposition to technology, particularly the technology of writing. Kreilkamp takes these readings one step further by arguing that Benjamin not only emphasizes this binary between orality and writing, but purposefully forms a connection between pre-modern oral storyteller and the modern intellectual in order to co-opt for the modern intellectual the authority invested in the spoken word (Kreilkamp 8-11).

While these readings do offer interesting insights into different aspects of storytelling and the mythologies that accompany modern portrayals of oral

storytellers,<sup>18</sup> ultimately I want to complicate what seems to be the dominant reading of this text as presenting a rather simple dyad in which the oral word is elevated over the written. “The Storyteller” is a text rife with contradictions, particularly when put into context within Benjamin’s own life and larger body of work. While this essay may at certain points dismiss the newspaper, the novel, and the short story as degraded forms of cultural exchange, the full title of Benjamin’s essay is, after all, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov.” In essence, Benjamin wrote “The Storyteller” in praise of the work of Nikolai Leskov – a Russian journalist, novelist, and short story writer. Moreover, mediums such as the newspaper, which Benjamin critiques in this essay, are described much more positively elsewhere, such as in his even more well known “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Written within the same year, Benjamin’s “The Work of Art” essay lauds the newspaper for its power, not to fortify the authority of the publicly-sanctioned, university-educated intellectual, but to turn the common man into an author (Benjamin, “Work” 232). Similar sentiments are expressed in Benjamin’s 1934 talk “The Author as Producer,” although here the Western bourgeois press is clearly distinguished from the Soviet press, with the former being detrimental and that latter beneficial to the working class. Finally, while in “The Storyteller” Benjamin claims that the novel’s shortcomings are a result of the novel’s dependence on the material form of the book, Benjamin himself was a self-

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<sup>18</sup> Kreilkamp in particular offers a very convincing genealogy in his first chapter outlining how this kind of mythology of the power of “voice” has not only persisted but has become part of the discourse of modern literary theory (Kreilkamp 11-14).

proclaimed bibliophile, with a travelling library he kept at his side even as he fled Nazi persecution.<sup>19</sup>

While these contradictions center upon, or are at least connected to, claims Benjamin makes in “The Storyteller,” they are indicative of yet a larger contradiction that suffuses Benjamin’s entire system of thinking as it is expressed throughout his oeuvre. On the one hand, Benjamin presents himself as an advocate of technology and modernization; yet at the same time, his writing clearly demonstrates a kind of romantic enthusiasm for an idealized past. As perhaps Benjamin’s most widely read essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” starkly illustrates this contradiction. In this essay Benjamin celebrates what he sees as the true revolutionary potential for technologies of mechanical reproduction, including photography and film as well as the printing press. Such technologies not only make art and literature available to the masses, but provide the masses with the opportunity to represent themselves. Yet one cannot possibly ignore Benjamin’s near romantic fascination with the idea of “aura,” that authenticity possessed by an original work of art based upon its uniqueness within time, space, and tradition. The existence of this kind of art is increasingly threatened within the modern world by the reproductive technologies of mass media – these same technologies that have such revolutionary potential.

Gerhard Richter, in his introduction to the essay collection *Benjamin’s Ghosts* (2002), suggests that it is in such spaces of discontinuity and contradiction that we

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<sup>19</sup> For Benjamin’s own take on his book collecting habit, see “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting” (1931).



must look to understand Benjamin's work and the insight he offers into modernity. As Richter explains:

...his [Benjamin's] texts strangely resist assimilation. They work to withdraw from straightforward meaning and transparent expression. The enigmatic truths that they offer must always be sought elsewhere, in a space that his text perpetually cross and delimit but never fully inhabit...To the extent that any truth can emerge from his writings at all, it is one that the reader must seek in what the text does not say on the surface, not even between the lines, but in an elsewhere that remains open to discussion. Indeed, the truth of his writings *is* this elsewhere. (Richter 3)

In a similar fashion, by exploring the contradictions surrounding such figures as Benjamin's storyteller I hope to elucidate what Benjamin has to tell us about storytelling, modernity, and modernism. I seek to do this not necessarily by resolving these contradictions, but by looking for the "elsewheres" that these contradictions open into. For while on one level, one might say that Benjamin's essay is premised on the assumption of a binary opposition between orality and writing, ultimately, Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" complicates and confounds the simple distinction between oral and written word. He offers instead a comparison between two different methods, rather than mediums, of telling a story – one that Benjamin associates with the pre-modern oral storyteller and represents via Leskov and another that he associates with the modern novel and newspaper. A conscious nostalgic construction, Benjamin's storyteller is a spectral figure, engaged in the production of a kind of

modernist ethical-aesthetic that undermines concepts of origin and authority, even as it claims power as an authority figure.

Ostensibly an essay comparing pre-modern storytelling and the pre-modern experience to the degraded condition of writers and human experience in the modern age, Benjamin's "Storyteller" is to a certain extent premised on the idea of a divide between orality and writing that both hierarchizes the spoken above the written word and places them on a linear trajectory, where orality is of the past and writing of the present. Yet at the same time, Benjamin undermines this distinction at key points throughout his essay. For example, Benjamin's example of the "story" which shows "what the true nature of storytelling is" is Herodotus' *written* account of the Egyptian king Psammetichus (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 90). Moreover, while writing may allow for a greater distance between storyteller and audience, according to Benjamin it is possible for a reader, although not the reader of a novel, to enjoy the same connection and companionship with an author that a listener enjoys with a speaker (100).

The title itself of Benjamin's essay is perhaps most indicative of the uncertain divide between the oral and spoken word, which this text both presents as a premise and consistently undercuts. The full title of Benjamin's essay is "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," yet a reader approaching Benjamin's text may well ask herself who is the storyteller referenced in the essay's title. Benjamin's text in fact contains references to multiple storytellers, two of which could be said to be equally prominent. On the one hand, there is the nameless, faceless figure of the pre-modern oral teller of tales; on the other, we have the figure on Leskov himself, who, although he is a writer rather than an oral crafter of tales,

Benjamin places among the ranks of “the great ones whose written version[s] differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 84). The connection between the first and latter clauses of this title is ultimately uncertain, and perhaps purposefully so. As Greaney notes, the central idea of the “storyteller” itself becomes a “composite figure” over the course of Benjamin’s essay (Greaney 16), and at times it is difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to determine whether a particular reference to a “storyteller” corresponds to one of these two major storytelling figures, to both, or to an even broader conglomeration.

Ambiguously at times pre-modern speaker and/or modern writer, the storyteller is from the very beginning established as a figure defined by its absence or distance from the present, as existing in a temporal elsewhere in the remote past. As Benjamin opens his essay: “Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting more distant. To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 83). This absence of the storyteller marks the present as a time in which experience cannot be understood or communicated via traditional or familiar methods. To recognize the likeness of the pre-modern storyteller in Leskov is to acknowledge and mourn this figure’s passing.

Benjamin’s use of the trope of “distance” in his description of the storyteller connects this figure and the oral tradition he represents to Benjamin’s earlier mentioned concept of “aura.” In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin describes his concept of

the storyteller as a “distant figure” in both temporal terms and as a visual, spatial metaphor. Speaking of Leskov as a modern version of this figure, Benjamin explains, “Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him [Leskov], or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal’s body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision” (83). Such an account has strong resonances with Benjamin’s description of the concept of the aura of historical and natural objects, which he defines as “the unique phenomena of distance, however close it may be” (“Work” 222). Like aura, orality carries with it a sense of authenticity as a kind of unique, first-hand experience, marked by the presence of the storyteller himself who relates the special kind of experience “that goes from mouth to mouth” (“Storyteller” 84). Also like aura, the presence of the storyteller in the modern age is increasingly being replaced by mechanical reproduction, in the form of writing and, in particular, with the specific mechanically reproduced mediums of the novel and the newspaper. However, it is worth noting that, while he does align the rise of mechanically reproduced writing with the decline of orality, Benjamin does not posit the latter event as the cause of the former. Instead both conditions are symptoms of the modern inability to understand and communicate experience. Explained in another way, one could say that Benjamin’s modernist moment is one during which modes of representation – both old and new – fail to convey the modern experience.

These parallels between Benjamin’s concepts of aura and orality are also useful insofar as they ultimately shed light on the interrelated nature of orality and literacy in Benjamin’s text and begin to draw into question the nature of orality itself.

As Eva Geulen points out, the concept of aura is to a certain extent dependent on the existence of mechanically reproduced art. Geulen explains, “The aura, as the distinguishing feature of traditional art, becomes visible only to the extent that art has lost this character. The manifestation of the aura arises out of its loss” (Geulen 135). In a similar fashion, one wonders to what extent Benjamin’s general idea of orality, and his concept of the storyteller in particular, is dependent upon the emergence of literacy, and even of the specific literate media of the newspaper and novel. Such a reading makes orality and literacy not binary opposites but rather mutually defining counterparts. Moreover, when regarded in this fashion, the concept of orality itself as Benjamin at first seems to present it, as an ontologically independent concept tied to a specific, historically-distant time, is destabilized. This is not, of course, to deny that a time existed before writing during which the spoken word was mankind’s primary mode of communication. However, what it does mean is that orality, as the idealized entity that Benjamin presents and yearns for, is a product created by the longings of a literate modernity, rather than a state that pre-existed and produces these longings.

Benjamin’s “Storyteller” essay does not just mourn the loss of this past, but rather it posits this past as a particularly appealing alternative to the present. The intense longing which Benjamin displays for this idealized, absent figure of the storyteller presents a clear nostalgic impulse, a kind of turn to the past in the face of modernity. Yet, inherent in this nostalgia as well is the sense that this ‘pre-modern past’ and the figure of the storyteller associated with it are not the stable entities they may at first appear to be. In her work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym defines the term ‘nostalgia’ based on this word’s etymology and common usage,

which fits Benjamin's essay to such a degree that the two works could have been written with each other in mind. As Boym states:

Nostalgia (from *nostros* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, drama and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks and burns the surface. (Boym xiii-xiv)

The figure of the storyteller that Benjamin mourns at the beginning of his essay acts like the “cinematic image of nostalgia” Boym mentions above. A hybrid figure of the past and the present, this figure is at once present to us, as an absence, and distant from us. This figure serves as a focus-point through which Benjamin expresses a desire for the past, for Benjamin regrets the absence of the storyteller from modern life not just for the sake of this figure itself but because the loss of this figure is symptomatic of a larger shift in the ability of human beings to comprehend and, in turn, effectively articulate their own experiences within the modern world. This desire for the past, for the distant figure of the storyteller, stands as an act of resistance to the present, an alternative to the degradation of experience and of communication by modern technologies of warfare, economics, and mass media, particularly the newspaper and modern novel.

Yet, to say that the storyteller acts as a “cinematic image of nostalgia” is to draw attention to its framed or fabricated nature, introducing a kind of epistemological, or even ontological, instability into this figure. It ultimately draws attention to the constructed nature of the past this figure represents. As Susan Stewart points out in her work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1983), “nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition” (S. Stewart 23). While the figure of the storyteller may represent a kind of ideal of aura, of authentic interaction between human beings, it is itself only a constructed repetition of this ideal, which no longer exists, and most probably never existed.

Certainly, although Benjamin does not pointedly identify his storyteller as a construction, his early descriptions of this figure convey a sense that the storyteller is Benjamin’s creation. Mark Conroy has argued that Benjamin’s earliest descriptions of Leskov set the figure of the storyteller as a fantasy. Referencing a quote we looked at earlier, Conroy points out that Benjamin’s claim that a distant view of Leskov allows one to see the outline of the pre-modern storyteller in him, “just as in a rock a human head or an animal’s body may appear to the observer at the proper distance or angle of vision,” shows that this storyteller is “a creation of Benjamin’s fancy, a chimera,” like that of an imagined human head in a rock (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 83; Conroy 96). Benjamin’s description of the pre-modern storyteller in the section that follows further supports the notion that Benjamin is constructing a chimera for his readers. Here, Benjamin attempts to provide a sense of the storyteller in its “full corporeality” by describing the storyteller as a composite of its two “archaic representatives,” the

medieval resident farmer and the traveling sailor (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 84). By invoking what he acknowledges as two "basic types," the storyteller becomes for the reader, as Benjamin terms it, "embodied" (85, 84). If Benjamin invokes the idea of the storyteller as imaginative creation in his first paragraph, in his second section he breathes life into this figure by giving him an occupation, a background community, and, in essence, a body. Benjamin's storyteller is thus both an implicit construction and an explicit repetition, created by Benjamin in order to represent an idealized vision of communication and overtly associated by Benjamin with pre-modern times.

Benjamin himself offers an example of this kind of "inauthentic-authentic" by way of his analysis of Leskov's short story, "The Voice of Nature." In this story, a small town official invites a visiting field marshal to dine with him. The field marshal knows he recognizes the official from somewhere, but cannot place him. The official acknowledges that the marshal knows him, but refuses to disclose his identity, instead inviting the official to dine with him again and again in the hopes that the marshal will eventually remember. The scene of recognition takes place on the marshal's final night in town. The official, suspecting what he must do to be recognized, sends his wife to bring in a copper hunting horn. As soon as the official puts the horn to his lips, the marshal recognizes him as the bugler from the regiment of Jaegers, who was so honest that the marshal put him in charge of monitoring men he suspected of being crooked suppliers. Benjamin is quick to point out the humor and underlying irony of this story, for this scene of recognition is simultaneously one of misrecognition. The marshal finally recognizes the bugler as the "honest" man he put in a position of power, yet Leskov has already informed his readers at the beginning of the text that



the villagers know that this official is wealthy beyond what would be warranted by his position, and must have come into his wealth through illegally exploiting his power. Thus the recognition of the bugler as the “honest” man from the regiment of Jaegers simultaneously reveals him to the readers as not an honest man, but the kind of wily trickster figure that so often serve as a protagonist in traditional tales (105-106). In this same way, the subject of a nostalgic longing, Benjamin’s pre-modern oral storyteller is a figure that is both recognized and misrecognized. He embodies both the ideal of authentic, spoken interaction between human beings and a constructed inauthentic, written representation of this ideal.

To say that, as an image of nostalgia, Benjamin’s storyteller is an inauthentic representation of the authentic is not to disparage the efficacy or power of this figure within the present context. Several recent critics have argued against the traditional perception of nostalgia as, as Stewart refers to it, “a social disease” that traps people within a negative, static state of lack and desire (S. Stewart ix). Boym identifies two types of nostalgia, which she terms as “restorative” and “reflective” (Boym xviii). The former is a kind of nostalgia that does not recognize the subject of its desire as nostalgic, but rather as truth and tradition. Associated with national and religious revivals, this kind of nostalgia, according to Boym, “knows two main plots – the return to origin and the conspiracy” (xviii). This type of nostalgia can be particularly dangerous, as Boym explains, “The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflective nostalgia breeds monsters” (xvi).

The alternative type of nostalgia, which Boym calls “reflective,” does not focus on a singular narrative positing a lost home, homeland, or culture that is equated with truth or tradition. According to Boym, reflective nostalgia focuses instead on the process of longing itself. As she explains, reflective nostalgia “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii). This kind of nostalgia possesses the potential to bind groups of people together to build a better future by rejecting the logic, values, and material conditions of the present in favor of a consciously constructed idealization of the past. Taking his cue in part from Boym, John J. Su, in his book on *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005), argues that, in the fiction he focuses on, nostalgic longings are engaged in not to mourn a lost “premodern purity,” but rather “they provide a means of establishing ethical ideals that can be shared by diverse groups who have in common only a longing for a past that never was” (Su 3). In this way, a reflective kind of nostalgia “facilitates an exploration of ethical ideals in the face of disappointing circumstances” (4).

A German Jew living in exile from Germany since the early 1930’s to avoid persecution by the rising Nazi party, Benjamin would have been no stranger to the dangers of restorative nostalgia, that is, the kind of nostalgia that posits the past as a singular narrative of truth and purity. Moreover, throughout his numerous works, Benjamin consistently demonstrates his understanding of history as a narrative construct. Indeed, Benjamin’s construction of the storyteller does not function so differently from the messianic figure of redemption that Benjamin describes in his

“Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). According to Benjamin, the present concept of happiness in any age is always inexorably bound to the idea that the future presents an opportunity for what Benjamin terms as “redemption” (Benjamin, “Theses” 254). Like nostalgia, “redemption” too is always a simultaneous backward and forward-looking idea – containing both the hope and possibility for delivery from a current state and the potential of restoration to a previous one. This past state, however, does not exist independent of the present, but rather is a construction created by it. As Benjamin explains, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past” (261).

The figure of the storyteller is a nostalgic construct created by Benjamin in order to compare an idealized past to a rejected present, with the goal of creating a common vision for the future. Ultimately, the true object of Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” is not to mourn the figure of storyteller, nor a past historical time period, nor the passing of orality per se, but to endorse a particular aesthetic of storytelling and of writing, one with implications that speak to the core of the modernist enterprise. Indeed, the ultimate comparison Benjamin seems to set up and maintain throughout “The Storyteller” is not between two different mediums of storytelling, orality and writing, but rather between two different ways of telling a story, one

which Benjamin associates with pre-modern orality and represents via Leskov and another that he associates with the modern novel and newspaper.

The former of these ways, the storytelling tradition associated with pre-modern orality and the figure of Leskov, may at first appear to depend upon the centralized figure and authority of the storyteller. This notion is central to Kreilkamp's argument that Benjamin's essay demonstrates the persistence of modern mythologies that privilege the oral over the written in order to ultimately co-opt the authority of the pre-modern oral storyteller for the modern intellectual (Kreilkamp 7-9). Certainly, Benjamin's essay emphasizes the importance of the storyteller, as a representative of the current state of a culture and as source of wisdom. However, at the same time, one must also acknowledge the way that Benjamin's explanation of how the act of storytelling actually works ultimately undermines the centralization of this authority in the storyteller through its reliance upon the reader. For the kind of story told by the pre-modern teller as well as by its modern literary incarnations requires a listener/reader to both engage in the process of interpreting a story and to acknowledge his or her own role in doing so. Benjamin makes very clear the expectation that the type of storytelling he associates with orality will always contain something "useful" for the listener/reader, be it a moral, practical advice, or a proverb (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 86). Yet this usefulness is presented not as a form of didacticism, but rather, as Benjamin terms it, as "having counsel" for one's audience (86). This concept of "counsel" represents Benjamin's ideal relationship between speaker and listener, writer and reader, for inherent in this term is an idea of exchange between storyteller and audience, and a requirement that a listener/reader participates

in the production of his own story. As Benjamin explains, “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.)” (86). Thus the production of story and of story meaning in an oral context requires a kind of audience engagement, where the moral or practical application of the story originates, not with the speaker, but out of the exchange between a (listening) speaker and (speaking) listener.

In the case of written texts, this reader engagement in the production of story and story meaning hinges on a kind of textual openness and ambiguity that requires interpretation. The contrast between the two types of storytelling Benjamin compares in his essay and their relationship to centralized authority and the reader comes through perhaps most clearly in Benjamin’s discussion of “information” versus “intelligence.” According to Benjamin, one characteristic common to both the newspaper and the modern novel is that they are “shot through with explanation” (89).<sup>20</sup> This kind of writing focuses on providing such information as facts and causal connections, so that any story related in this form comes to the reader already explained. This information is rooted in what is near and familiar to the reader and is verifiable. Intelligence, on the other hand, comes from afar – “whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition” – and thus has a kind of aura that gives it validity even though it cannot be verified (89). Stories that provide intelligence require the reader to participate in the creation of meaning, and thus each

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<sup>20</sup> One could arguably connect Benjamin’s critique of “information” and Woolf’s earlier discussed critique of Edwardian materialism. Like Benjamin, Woolf is critical of writing which overburdens the reader with “facts” rather than providing them access to a deeper sense of reality.

story holds meaning particular to the experience that the reader brings to it. As Benjamin explains, “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (89).

For Benjamin, Herodotus’ account of the Egyptian king Psammenitus exemplifies how this kind of openness creates a story offering its readers “intelligence” and meaning rather than “information” and facts. As was mentioned earlier, although Herodotus’ account is a written history, Benjamin cites it as an example through which he may show “what the nature of true storytelling is” (90). According to Benjamin’s summary, Herodotus outlines the fate of Psammenitus roughly thus. Captured by one of his enemies, Cambyses, King of Persia, Psammenitus is beaten and forced to sit along a road where the Persian triumphal procession would pass. He witnessed his daughter working as a slave and his son being paraded on his way to execution, yet Psammenitus is moved to tears only when he sees an old servant walking as a prisoner. What gives this story its power, according to Benjamin, is Herodotus’ refusal to explain why Psammenitus is moved at the sight of his servant but not that of his own family. This refusal asks the reader to engage in an act of interpretation that is renewed by every new reading. As Benjamin explains: “That is how this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment. It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day” (90).

Such demand placed on the reader is characteristic of both modernism and the modernist project of interrogating representation. In *The Implied Reader* (1974), Wolfgang Iser uses canonical modernist texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* to argue that in twentieth-century novels the author places a greater demand on the reader by refusing to make the connections necessary to create a logically coherent story for him or her. This refusal brings to the forefront an awareness of the human need to narrativize and allows the reader to discover his or her own "constant involvement in 'home-made' illusions and fiction" (Iser xiii-xiv). By being made aware of how the reader participates in creating something that the reader consciously recognizes as "story," the reader is made aware of the role he or she plays in constructing narratives, including seemingly personal narratives of self and communal narratives of history. In this way accepted narratives of self and history are opened again to reexamination and revision. The reader, in a sense, becomes aware of his or her role as an author.

Delivered as a speech in 1934 at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" compliments and corroborates this reading of "The Storyteller," even as it speaks even more pointedly to the problematic issue of authorial authority. In this talk, Benjamin presents what he sees as the role that ought to be played by the author in the Marxist<sup>21</sup> mission to oppose fascism and further the cause of the proletariat. The key to the author's success in accomplishing these two

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<sup>21</sup> As Hannah Arendt explains in her introduction to *Illuminations*, a collection of some of Benjamin's most well known essays, Benjamin's relation to what might be called mainstream-Marxism was complicated. His writings, which can range in tone and focus from the concrete and material to the mystic and metaphoric, were often criticized, or refused publication by Marxist presses, because they weren't exactly orthodox. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called his thinking "undialectic," for example, and claimed that his writing moved in "materialist categories, which by no means were Marxist ones" (qtd. Arendt 10). Benjamin, however, very clearly saw himself writing in a Marxist theoretical framework.

goals, according to Benjamin, is for the author to align himself with the proletariat, not by denying or sacrificing his privileged position as an intellectual but by embracing his common role with the proletariat as a producer who understands his position as subject to capitalist modes of production. Working from this common role, the author's first imperative is not to instruct but to empower. Rather than seek to represent others, the author must enable individuals, particularly those among the proletariat, to represent themselves by also becoming writers. As Benjamin explains, "*An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one.* What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce..." (233, italics in original).

Yet while Benjamin sees the author as playing an important role in the fight against fascism and the possibility of a proletarian revolution, he also demonstrates that he sees in the position of the author a danger of perpetuating the very kinds of hierarchies that he wishes to eliminate. This is a risk particularly for the author who is not originally of the working class. As Benjamin explains, "He [the author] must...find his place *beside* the proletariat. But what kind of place is that? That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron – an impossible place" (228). Benjamin's solution to this dilemma, namely for the author to renounce all claims to "spiritual qualities" or individual genius and to instead embrace an equal position to the proletariat mass as a fellow producer, remains problematic, for the bourgeois author must always remain "beside," and always holds a privileged position of enabling others to write. As in "The Storyteller," the site of authorship remains a position of contested power relations, as Benjamin at once seeks to disperse the authority of the



author by empowering readers but must retain the author's central role in enabling this dispersion. In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin attempts to resolve this dilemma by shifting the focus from the notion of the writer as an individual of genius, superior to the reader, to the writer's material mode of production. In "The Storyteller," he shifts the locus of authority itself from the speaker/writer to the listener/reader. Benjamin's storyteller is both a figure of authority and a space vacated of authority. At the beginning of the essay, Benjamin writes of this absence in terms of distance, but partway through he introduces a new trope of absence – death. In "The Storyteller" the authority and authenticity of the storytelling experience ultimately lay in the body of the speaker, both in terms of its presence *and* in its impending non-presence. This is what is meant when Benjamin declares, "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 94).

### **Spectral Connections: Death, Authority, and the Modernist Oral Storytelling Paradigm**

What carries authority in Benjamin's paradigm is the story itself in the hands of the listener; but this story, like its teller, is a specter caught between opposing modes of existence. According to Benjamin, the authority of the story derives from death, for it is the inevitability and regular occurrence of death that connects modern man with the patterns of history and the natural world. As he explains, the storyteller "has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 94). Thus the decline of the art of storytelling in the modern world parallels and in part can be attributed to modernity's impulse to avoid the presence of death in the everyday, to relegate death to

sanatoriums or hide it in hospitals. These physical sites/sights of death have become hidden from view. “In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died... Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity” (93-94). Like the experiences from the battlefields of World War I, another site of death, the stories belonging to the dying in these places have become incommunicable, and the modern world is worse off for this loss.

The presence of death within life provides the storyteller with authority. One might call this presence a kind of promise that both is a part of every story – whether a story ends in death or whether the inevitability of death can be felt in the forward progress of time – and can never itself be narrated. As Garrett Stewart points out, death is commonly portrayed as the point at which a story moves beyond the realm of what can be narrated, since to move beyond death requires the expression of non-being in words (G. Stewart, *Death* 3-5).<sup>22</sup> D. A. Miller argues that it is precisely the desire to reach a point of closure, the point of ending beyond which no story can be told, that drives narrative forward. Stories come to an end when what Miller calls the “narratable,” a state of lack consisting of a desire and forces that resist this desire, becomes unnarratable by reaching a kind of fulfillment (D. Miller ix-x).<sup>23</sup> One might

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to imply that writers do not attempt to render the state beyond death, only that death creates a kind of complex representational problem. As Stewart argues, “death in fiction is the fullest instance of form indexing content, is indeed the moment when content, comprising the imponderables of negation and vacancy, can be found dissolving to pure form” (G. Stewart, *Death* 3). Stewart’s *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* investigates the work of Victorian and modernist writers who attempt to create a vocabulary for depicting the non-experience of death.

<sup>23</sup> Miller goes on to argue, however, like the child’s game of *Fort!/Da!* described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the desire and anxiety of lack is always more powerful than the gratification of fulfillment, creating an asymmetrical relationship between narrative movement and closure (D. Miller 265-267).

argue then that to say that death authorizes the storyteller is to acknowledge the way that every story is both driven and legitimized by its own impending negation. Stories are haunted by the validating ghost of their end.

However, I see Benjamin's account of storytelling, and the authorizing force behind it, as spectral in another way as well. While the authority of a story comes from death, for Benjamin it is in that borderland between life and death, in the moment of passing, where the story comes into full power and existence. As he explains:

It is, however, characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 94)

Story, in its full authority and meaning, becomes communicable only as it encounters a borderland space, the site of dying, and a borderland time, the moment of passing. From that space and that moment of impending negation, authority spills outward, pervading the teller's life with meaning and making it transmissible as story. The

moment of death described above by Benjamin – in which the dying man unfolds “the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it” – mirrors the act of encounter that occurs when an individual listens to or interprets a story. As Benjamin concludes his essay, “The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself” (109). Both constitute instances of self-revelation.

Jacques Derrida begins *Specters of Marx* (1994) – another work written from a historical moment in which Europe felt itself poised on the edge of dramatic change<sup>24</sup> – with an exordium that describes the necessity of a similar kind of encounter, or of assuming a similar kind of position, in order to answer what Derrida poses the central question of ethics: how to live? Contemplating the meaning of the statement “I would like to learn to live, finally,” Derrida remarks that it is only from the perspective of death, or rather from that liminal position in-between life and death that we can learn what living is. As he states, “If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between the two, and between all the ‘two’s’ one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost” (Derrida, *Specters* xviii, italics in original). This spectral space between life and death – this space of specters – is outside of time. The question of “how to live?” originates in the future even as we move towards this future. It is also question concerned with ghosts, or as Derrida terms them “those who *are not there*,”

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* is an expanded version of a series of talks that Derrida gave in April of 1993 at a conference organized by the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside. The focus of the conference was to consider the fate of Marxism and of Marxist theory and activism in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. Derrida argues that despite the celebratory attitude of Western neo-liberals, Marx and his ideas are and will continue to be powerful forces, as they remain “present” as specters – shadows of a past now gone, but also holding the potential to shape the future by continuing to be present (as absences) within the newly dominant global capitalist system.

those who are no longer present and those who are not yet present, to whom we hold a responsibility (xix, italics in original).

This spectral space that Derrida argues to be the position from which we should consider ethical questions is exactly the kind of space that for Benjamin is both created by the act of storytelling and occupied by the storyteller, a kind of “no space” where we find the composite, spectral storyteller, who while in our present is also of the past (as the pre-modern storyteller) and of our future (as the longed for nostalgic idealization). While Benjamin’s essay poses its critique of modern storytelling as an aesthetic issue, as an issue of how one ought to tell a story, he also posits the idea that the way one tells a story has ethical implications. How we tell stories shapes our understanding of self and the relation between self and other. It shapes our understanding of the past and of the (nostalgic) future we yearn for.

The storyteller haunts Benjamin’s modernity, as both an origin and a future, an original and a construct. Yet one could argue that this haunting is not unique to Benjamin alone. Modernism as a movement is haunted by the figure of the oral storyteller, this figure which simultaneously represents, displaces, and disperses storytelling authority, which renews the originary connection between story and storyteller body, and yet reveals this body to be a site constructed by story. From out of a space of lack, of non-present presence, the modernist storyteller speaks, wielding the authority of non-authority, an outsider speaking from within the borders of lived experience. Like Eliot’s Prufrock, the modernist storyteller’s voice is the voice of a specter: “I am Lazarus, come back from the dead,/ Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all – ” (Eliot, “Love” 94-95).

## Chapter 2

### Orality and Outcasts: Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Narrator

Benjamin's pre-modern spectral storyteller provides an illuminating example of the modernist oral storytelling paradigm. But where did this paradigm come from, and how did it develop? For answers to such questions I turn in this chapter to the work of Joseph Conrad. The figure of the storyteller is, of course, a near omnipresent persona in Conrad's fiction, so it should come as no surprise that a project focusing on representations of orality in early twentieth-century literature should find his work to be an appropriate starting point. Conrad's influence on British and Anglophone writers of the twentieth-century is undeniable. From T. S. Eliot's nod to *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in the title and epigraph of "The Hollow Men" (1925) to Chinua Achebe's critical lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1975), writers on both ends of the century clearly perceived Conrad as a precursor to be responded to. Moreover, within the early twentieth-century, Conrad set the standard for representing a kind of fictional storyteller with his creation of the character-narrator Charlie Marlow, one that powerfully reverberated within British cultural consciousness. This standard is evident in numerous literary articles and reviews from popular journals, both during the height of Conrad's career and in the decades following his death in 1924.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting this focus on Marlow by Conrad's contemporaries, recent Conrad scholars tracing a transition from a Victorian aesthetic

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<sup>25</sup> A full list of such articles would require more space than is available here, but some interesting examples include: *The Bookman's* 1924 contest awarding a prize to a reader for submitting the best description of Marlow; Phyllis Bentley's 1931 article from *The Bookman*, "The Story-teller in Fiction," which offers a kind of evolutionary ladder tracing deployments of this device, with Conrad's Marlow at the top; and H. C. Harwood's 1932 review for *The Saturday Review* of William McFee's *The Harbour-Master*, in which Harwood sums up the inadequacy of McFee's employment of the device of the storyteller by stating, "One realizes that McFee is not a Conrad..." (Harwood 127). Such articles demonstrate that both Conrad and Marlow enjoyed a kind of literary celebrity in their own time.

to a modernist one often identify Marlow, or one of the Marlow-texts, as a turning point.<sup>26</sup>

However, I contend that the full story of the storyteller in Conrad, and of Conrad's legacy to a movement we can call modernism, has yet to be told, in part because it requires digging past the towering presence of Marlow as *the* iconic early twentieth-century storytelling figure and prior to Conrad's most well-known works. Given the widely acknowledged importance of storytelling figures within Conrad's oeuvre, surprisingly little critical attention has focused on Conrad's own earliest adventures in storytelling. This chapter fills this critical gap by exploring Conrad's second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), through the lens of its representation of and own experimentation with the act of storytelling. *Outcast* establishes Conrad as a seminal site for understanding a wider field of 'modernism' predicated on a dependence upon oral storytelling as both a means and a target of critique. Moreover,

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<sup>26</sup> Numerous critics have suggested connections between the character of Marlow or his performances in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or *Lord Jim* (1901) and the emergence of a movement that can broadly be called "modernism," although the exact meaning of this term can vary. A common thread among these various inflections of "modernism" might be traced in that each posits a kind of ideological shift differentiating Conrad from his Victorian forbearers (although some critics stress continuities as well), which is accompanied by or communicated through narrative innovations. These innovations are most often connected in some fashion to Marlow's role as storyteller and/or to Conrad's foregrounding of generic conventions. While constraints of space prevent me here from doing full justice to their arguments, I recommend the following as starting points: J. Hillis Miller's discussion of "impressionism" and *Heart of Darkness* in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1965); Fredric Jameson's discussion of *Lord Jim* in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981); Wendy B. Faris' "The 'Dehumanization' of the Arts: J. M. W. Turner, Joseph Conrad, and the Advent of Modernism" (1989); Tony E. Jackson's "Turning into Modernism: *Lord Jim* and the Alteration of the Narrative Subject" (1993); Paul Wake's *Conrad's Marlow* (2007); and Daniel Just's "Between Narrative Paradigms: Joseph Conrad and the Shift from Realism to Modernism from a Genre Perspective" (2008). I particularly recommend Michael Valdez Moses' "Disorientalism: Conrad and the Imperial Origins of Modernist Aesthetics" (2007) and Walter Göbel's "The Birth of Modernism in the 'Heart of Darkness'" (2007). Göbel's examination of *Heart of Darkness* and Moses' examination of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* offer similar arguments placing the origins of the modernist aesthetic in the disorientation, uncertainty, and displacement experienced during intercultural exchanges occurring within the context of empire. For both Moses and Göbel, Conrad's storytelling techniques, including the device of Marlow, reveal the profound confusion and anxiety, or as Moses calls it, the "disorientalism," of the Western mind as it confronts within empire that which cannot be fit into its linguistic and cultural schemas. I, too, argue for a connection between the experience of empire, the expression of this experience through story, and the development of modernism; however, I see this connection at work in an earlier text.

by focusing my exploration on *Outcast*, an earlier, largely critically neglected text<sup>27</sup> whose engagement with orality has gone unacknowledged, I hope to provide grounds not only for rethinking modernism but for expanding our understanding of Conrad's preoccupation with the relation between the spoken and the written word.

Critics have long posed Conrad as a writer who privileges the oral over the written, who uses oral storytellers to overcome the distance print presents between author and audience. One of the earliest and doubtlessly most influential critics to express this idea was Edward Said in his foundational essay, "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative" (1974). Said argues that Conrad saw writing as a solitary, painful, and isolating experience. Thus he sought to transcend it by transforming the written word into visual experience (Said 118-119). According to Said, Conrad employs representations of oral storytelling in an attempt to cross out the absence of the body associated with writing with the voice's presence (120).<sup>28</sup> Within the past few years, some scholars have challenged these assumptions in Conrad's later fiction.

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<sup>27</sup> As Andrea White has noted, Conrad's earliest works have often been dismissed as "apprentice fiction" (A. White 1). Even in comparison with other early texts, *Outcast* finds little favor. Ian Watt's foundational study of Conrad, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979), dedicates a chapter to each of Conrad's early novels – *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), *Lord Jim* – and one novella – *Heart of Darkness*. *Outcast* is notably excluded. However, it is important to note that this largely neglected work is in fact foundational in the trajectory of Conrad's career. Its composition spanned a transition point in Conrad's own life, during which his inability to acquire an appropriate berth on a sailing vessel prompted him to commit to a literary career. Although even the most positive reviews of *Outcast* contained some small measure of critique for what was perceived as Conrad's wordy style, it did further bolster his reputation as a writer of talent and potential (see, for example, the reviews published in the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Daily News* (Sherry 63-64, 68). The publication of *Outcast* also expanded Conrad's circle of literary contacts, as Conrad's response to H. G. Wells' unsigned review in *The Saturday Review* led to a new friendship (for a copy of this review, see Sherry 73-76). In this way, *Outcast* opened further publishing opportunities. Most importantly, however, for our concerns here, it is in *Outcast* that Conrad first begins to pick at the thread of a problem that he will spend the entirety of his career unwinding, a problem concerning the interconnected nature of modern modes of representation, aggressive nationalisms, and imperialism. Now himself a committed author, Conrad confronts in his second novel the complicated position of storytelling as an act where issues both aesthetic and ethical are at stake.

<sup>28</sup> For variations of the argument that Conrad uses oral storytelling situations as a proxy for connecting with his audience, see Randall Craig's article "Swapping Yarns: The Oral Mode in *Lord Jim*" (1981), Steven Barza's "Bonds of Empathy: The Widening Audience in *Lord Jim*" (1984), and Mark Conroy's *Modernism and Authority: Strategies of Legitimation in Flaubert and Conrad* (1985), particularly the chapter "The Kernel and the Enveloping Haze" (87-98).



Recently, Michael Greaney has argued in *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (2002) that Conrad's later work demonstrates a distrust of all language, both spoken and written. However, Conrad's early fiction is largely still regarded as presenting idealized visions of oral communication and communities. My own investigation was sparked by the observation that oral communication in *Outcast* is most often prone to misconnection and failure. This observation, in turn, begs the question: What is Conrad trying to work out at this early point in his career concerning the nature of the spoken word and its ability to bring disparate individuals into relation? I hope to show here that *Outcast* at times reiterates, but ultimately questions the privileging of the oral and the notion that, compared to writing, oral storytelling presents the opportunity for direct connection between speaker and listener. Rather, oral storytelling scenes in this text often highlight personal expectations and social customs that circumscribe such exchanges and emphasize the mediated nature of human interactions.

*Outcast* repositions the figure of the storyteller and the act of storytelling within turn-of-the-century British culture. This repositioning fundamentally connects to the novel's critique of European, and particularly British, imperialism, since the pivot point for this shift is a figure that played an essential role in supporting the British imperial project. I call this figure the "imperial narrator." An iconic figure within turn-of-the-century British cultural consciousness, the imperial narrator appears in both historical and literary texts, in paintings and popular culture. This figure would certainly have been familiar to Victorian readers of literature of empire. Typically the bearer of a univocal story justifying British imperialism, this figure

reiterates dominant cultural narratives.<sup>29</sup> Conrad's representation of storytellers in *Outcast* expresses anxiety not only about communication, but about the way that preexisting cultural narratives shape perception and understanding. This anxiety leads, from one perspective, to a diminishment of the traditional authority of the storyteller. From another perspective, however, one might say that Conrad precipitates not the diminishment, but in a shift in the locus and impact of this authority, a move from the presupposition of transparency and certainty to the assertion of potential limitations and uncertainty. In this way, Conrad's critique of the imperial narrator exorcises a space to make room for later, more ambiguous storytelling figures such as Marlow.

*Outcast* is a tale of personal and political intrigue. It unfolds the story of a shift in power in the small Malay settlement of Sambir, a shift precipitated by one man telling another man's secret. Having lost his job for stealing from his employer, the ambitious Peter Willems is brought to Sambir by his only friend, Tom Lingard. There, he quarrels with Lingard's equally ambitious son-in-law, Kaspar Almayer, and falls in love with Aïssa, the beautiful half-Arab daughter of a former pirate. Under the influence of Aïssa and the vengeful Babalatchi, Willems reveals Lingard's secret knowledge of how to navigate Sambir's river to his most formidable trading rival, Abdulla bin Selim. This revelation effectively breaks Lingard's trade monopoly in Sambir and enables a group of Malays to overthrow the current, Lingard-sponsored government.

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<sup>29</sup> In using this term, I draw on James Phelan's concept of "cultural narratives," meaning narratives that are so pervasive within a given culture that their authorship cannot be attributed to a single individual, but rather belong to an entire society or subgroup of society (Phelan, *Living* 8). These are so widely disseminated that they are taken as "truth," rather than being recognized as cultural constructs.

Centrally concerned with the relationship between the creation and circulation of knowledge and manifestations of power in an imperial context, *Outcast* features a cast of oral storytellers – characters either directly portrayed or indirectly described as transmitting experience by word of mouth. Willems and Babalatchi, the two vagabonds for which Conrad originally planned to name his text, are both consummate storytellers. We first meet Willems engaging in a common activity for him, sharing stories of his success and personal philosophy over a game of pool. On the way home, he contemplates waking up his wife and possibly the entire Da Souza family to hear him talk – an event also not out of the norm. We also first meet Babalatchi engaged in an act of storytelling, as he recounts for Lakamba news of Aïssa and Willems’ romance. Later he deploys storytelling as a tactic of persuasion in dealing with both Abdullah and Lingard. Almayer, Aïssa, Lingard – each outcasts in their own way – also appear in their own storytelling scenes. Many of these scenes of storytelling are also oral performances; they highlight links between storytelling conventions and personal expectations and social customs that circumscribe such exchanges. They make evident the ways in which cultural narratives shape individual perception and understanding of self in relation to others. They connect storytelling patterns to the reality of how power is distributed within a given culture.

In its portrayal of the British captain, Tom Lingard, *Outcast* presents a variation of the imperial narrator. Through the self-aggrandizing tales he shares with his fellow sailors and traders, Lingard schematizes a sense of his own subjectivity according to a paternal paradigm. Moreover, the text’s framing of Lingard as an “honest,” hard-working seaman whose convictions come from direct experience and

common sense rather than book-learning establishes a lineage with the figure of the imperial narrator in their mutual claim to authenticity and reliability. This claim, however, is undermined by the various other storytelling voices that repeat, reframe, and provide counter-narratives to Lingard's. In this way, Conrad critiques not only Lingard and his stories, but also the shared cultural understanding that shapes the audience's expectations of the teller – that is, expectations held both by listeners within the text and by readers of it.

I am not the first to notice *Outcast's* critique of British imperialism. Andrea White and Linda Dryden have explored the relation of Conrad's fiction to popular literary genres that often propagate imperial ideology, such as nonfictional travel narratives and adventure fiction, or "imperial romance," to use Dryden's term. Both see Conrad as working within the perimeters of these genres while simultaneously undermining the imperialist assumptions that they are premised upon. I share White and Dryden's interest in Conrad's relation to literary traditions that shape turn-of-the-century British cultural consciousness; however, my focus on storytellers allows me to make the argument that *Outcast* is significant not only for its anti-imperial sentiment, but also as a work of early modernism. Indeed, my study demonstrates that, at least for Conrad, the move towards a modernist aesthetic that interrogates traditional modes of representation fundamentally connects to the development of an anti-imperial ethic that undermines dominant cultural narratives. Moreover, my focus on storytellers also enables me to connect the development of a modernist aesthetic with a kind of skepticism towards certain tropes traditionally associated with orality, even as these tropes are deployed within a text. In a manner similar to Benjamin's

“Storyteller” essay, Conrad invokes notions of presence and authenticity in association with oral storytelling only to undercut them, and his presentation of oral storytellers has implications for the possibilities of written story in the modern world.

In the next section I briefly define this figure I call the “imperial narrator.” I then turn to *Outcast*’s critique of the imperial narrator and the ethical justifications it offers for Empire. I argue that the multiple storytellers within *Outcast* are the primary agents of this critique. The third section of this chapter presents an investigation of the third-person limited omniscient narrator of *Outcast* to offer an explanation of how issues of storytelling represented within the text are also explored through the novel’s own storytelling apparatus. Creating what I call an “unsettling narration,” Conrad presents the readers of *Outcast* with a narrator who consistently undermines his own authority. By highlighting this third-person narrator as a mediating presence within the text, Conrad departs from a Victorian tradition in which narrators could be regarded as transparent reporters of the material world, capable of providing stable moral guidance, and moves towards a kind of storytelling instability that is distinctly modernist in nature. In my final section, I consider the “afterlife” of the imperial narrator within Conrad’s subsequent personal and professional writings.

### **The Imperial Narrator**

Empire has ruled the British imagination at least since the second half of the sixteenth-century, when Elizabeth I first began sponsoring expeditions to the New World, challenging the dominance of Spain.<sup>30</sup> Dryden highlights this connection by

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it was during the 1570’s that John Dee, man of science and consultant of Elizabeth I, coined the phrase “British Empire,” which he used “to describe and justify England’s claim to the North Atlantic, based on the

beginning her important study *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance* (2000) with a close reading of “The Boyhood of Raleigh” (1870), a painting by Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896). The painting depicts two small boys, one of whom is Walter Raleigh, engrossed in listening to an old sailor pointing to the horizon as he apparently tells a story of a distant land. Remarking upon the contrast between the rugged appearance of the sailor and the starched sobriety of the mesmerized boys, Dryden notes how the sailor’s gesture to the open sky and sea conveys the possibility of adventure beyond the limits of English society. She argues, “Conceived at a time when the Empire was at its height, this painting symbolizes the adventuring spirit engendered by the imperial mission. It also represents the fascination with empire and its promised adventures that was the theme and the impetus for much of the popular literature of the second half of the nineteenth century” (Dryden 2). For my own purposes, I am less interested in the horizon than in the hand pointing towards it and the weathered body connected to that hand, which validates the authenticity of the tale being told. I see Millais’ painting as presenting one iteration of the central figure of my own study, the imperial narrator. Both historical and literary in nature, this figure played a pivotal role in “mapping” the boundaries of British national subjectivity, in both geographical and narrative terms.

From the perspective of turn-of-the-century British mass culture, storytelling is most often the privilege of the colonizer, or, as he would have more likely been called, the heroic adventurer abroad. This is not to say that colonized peoples did not

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mythical conquests of King Arthur and Prince Madoc, the latter allegedly the first discoverer of North America in the twelfth century” (Appleby 62). Dee is thus the first in a long line of British scholars and supporters of imperial expansion to ethically justify empire as an inherent right of Great Britain, one that is intimately tied to national identity.

tell stories, either amongst themselves or in England. Indeed, as Tom Henthorne has noted, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, England saw a growing number of novels written in English by subjects of imperial colonies, such as India, partly as a result of British efforts to promote English there as the language of higher education (Henthorne 21-25). Colonized peoples did tell stories, but by the turn-of-the-century, the central figure of the storyteller in British literature of empire had long been established as the conquering European hero. Raleigh himself would, after all, go on to contribute to his own legend by publishing accounts of his travels, a post-exploration enterprise that was common among almost all of the most well-known early explorers of the new world and that continued on into the twentieth-century, from Raleigh (1552-1618) to Captain James Cook (1728-1779) to Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904). As a genre closely related to and, as Andrea White convincingly argues, arising out of these kinds of travel narratives, the fictions of empire that enjoyed great popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth-century – texts by writers like H. Rider Haggard, R. L. Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and W. H. Hudson – also commonly presented such storytelling figures. Haggard’s Allan Quartermain, best known from *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *Allan Quartermain* (1887), and Horace Holly, of *She* (1887), provide two of the clearest examples.<sup>31</sup> Stevenson’s Jim Hawkins and Dr. Livesay, each of whom narrates part of *Treasure Island* (1883), also qualify.

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<sup>31</sup> Haggard wrote at least a dozen novels somehow related to the character of Allan Quartermain, but *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Allan Quartermain* were the earliest, the most well known, and narrated by Quartermain himself.

Such storytellers are variations of “the imperial narrator” – not merely because they are British travelers telling of their adventures abroad, although this status is a prerequisite as well, but because their stories bolster the British imperial project and its self-justifications. The imperial narrator works both synchronically and diachronically to perpetuate imperialism’s underlying ideologies. In the moment of storytelling, the teller iterates, and thereby enacts, a process of subject formation that defines what it means to be British in an imperial context. Often this subjectivity is based upon and reifies imperialist cultural narratives, such as pseudoscientific claims of white superiority or the idea that imperialism benefits colonized peoples. Moreover, these storytellers are literally and figuratively part of the cycle of empire, for the imperial narrator is a means whereby imperialism perpetuates itself as the previous generation of explorers inspires the next. The returned adventurer tells his story, as the sailor to young Raleigh in Millais’ painting, or, more lucratively, writes his story so it can be sold to an audience of young boys, some of whom will be inspired to become such adventurers themselves.

Haggard’s *She* presents a clear depiction of this pattern in a narrative that aligns familial relations and nationalism. Upon coming of age, Leo Vincey inherits a potsherd upon which is written the story of his ancestor Kallikrates, who was both loved and murdered by the immortal queen of the lost African city of Kôr, “She-who-must-be-obeyed.” The potsherd also contains brief notes from Leo’s subsequent male ancestors, each of whom has traveled to Africa in search of Kôr and with the intent of killing She. Each ancestor addresses his tale to the next generation, bidding his heir to return to Africa and succeed where he failed. Leo’s own adventure in Africa is



recorded by his adopted father, Horace Holly, who accompanies him. Haggard presents Holly's narration with the pretense that he has received the manuscript directly from Holly to be edited and published, now including the British public in this familial cycle. Holly is thus the latest, but not necessarily the last, in a series of adventurer-storytellers.

Of course, the fictional character of Holly and the earlier mentioned historical figures of Captain Cook and Sir Morton Stanley hold something in common that makes them, on the surface, different from the sailor in Millais' painting. While Millais' sailor addresses his young listeners face-to-face, a true oral storyteller, Holly, Cook, and Stanley are all writers. However, every manifestation of the imperial narrator, whether presented on the printed page, painted canvas, or in person, evinces an element of the oral. Following the work of Debra Tannen, Paul Goetsch argues that orality and writing are not fixed in a binary opposition, but rather that both terms can be associated with various types of texts and discourses (Goetsch, *Oral* 6-7). Orality is typically thought of as auditory, fleeting, and communal. In oral storytelling situations, the speaker's body is directly accessible to the audience, and can even play a role in averring the veracity or affecting the impact of a tale. Writing, on the other hand, is usually categorized as visual, enduring, and solitary, since the story appears separately from the speaking body.

It is this last distinction between orality and writing, the one that focuses on the speaker's body, that the figure of the imperial narrator complicates. The tales told by an imperial narrator, even when written, are always in some manner tied to an idea of the teller's body, thus making it a more oral kind of writing. Not only nonfictional

accounts, but even fictional representations of the imperial narrator possess a degree of authenticity within the public eye based on the author's experience.<sup>32</sup> Thus in 1891, Andrew Lang wrote approvingly of the most recent crop of imperial fiction writers: "All such conquerors, whether they write with the polish of M. Pierre Loti, or with the carelessness of Mr. Boldrewood, have, at least, seen new worlds for themselves; have gone out of the streets of the over-populated lands into the open air ..." (qtd. A. White 8). These authors' own experiences abroad lend a sense of authenticity to their writing, of connection between the words on the page and a physical reality. The imperial narrator's claim to authenticity, to transparency, based on experience is, in fact, the fundamental quality that authorizes him to speak or write. It is also the fundamental assumption that Conrad contests.

### **"Are you honest?": Captain Lingard and the Limits of Imperial Storytelling**

*Outcast* exposes empire as a zone rife with competing cultural narratives, each of which constitutes an alternative paradigm for mapping experience. Some of these paradigms are directly available to the reader; others, in the manner of Abdulla's "immense correspondence," which in its travels "had nothing to do with the infidels of colonial post-offices," are hinted at while their contents remain inaccessible (Conrad, *Outcast* 86). I see *Outcast* as distinctly modernist because its fascination with the conflicts created by these opposing paradigms ultimately leads inward,

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<sup>32</sup> My notion of the "imperial narrator" shares some commonalities with Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "seeing-man," a protagonist figure from early European travel writing "whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (Pratt 9). Both rely on notions of firsthand experience and perception to validate their authority. Both deploy imperialist tropes in their descriptions of non-European landscapes in order to simultaneously assert European dominance and selfless justifications for this dominance. My concept of the "imperial narrator" differs in how it connects the deployment of such tropes to orality and to cultural narratives tying the spoken word, and writing based in the spoken word, to notions of transparency and authenticity.

interrogating the very cultural narratives upon which the novel and the society that produced and consumes it are based. *Outcast* performs this interrogation through its presentation of Lingard as an imperial narrator whose self-formulations are undercut by encounters with other storytelling bodies. Almayer, Babalatchi, Willems, and Aïssa – each, like Lingard, perform acts of storytelling, and in doing so purposefully invoke specific cultural narratives that circulate within the novel’s colonial context. Indeed, *Outcast* could be classified as a precursor to the modern espionage novel – full of plots, counterplots, and speakers who, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to manipulate their listeners (and vice versa) through the deployment of story patterns.<sup>33</sup>

Introduced in the text as “a master, a lover, a servant of the sea”, several critics have identified Captain Lingard as having many of the characteristics of a stock hero of the imperial romance tradition (14; Dryden 86; Henthorne 2; A. White 141). Not just the subject of Conrad’s tale, however, Lingard is also often the subject of his own. Lingard is known throughout the Malay Archipelago for his skill as a seaman, his bravery, his pride, and his verbosity. The text describes as a common occurrence Lingard generously imparting advice to young sailors. In the billiard-rooms of port cities, men pause their games to hear him talk of Sambir, the small settlement to which Lingard enjoys exclusive trade by virtue being the only sailor that knows how to navigate its river. Always ready to back advice with deeds, “Captain Tom went sailing from island to island, appearing unexpectedly in various localities,

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<sup>33</sup> The genre of the modern espionage novel is one that Conrad arguably helped to invent even more directly through later novels such as *The Secret Agent* (1907), a text which employs multiple conflicting and contiguous perspectives in delivering its tale.

beaming, noisy, anecdotal, commendatory or comminatory, but always welcome” (Conrad, *Outcast* 153-154).

Lingard’s tales of Sambir – his penchant for bragging about its beauty and value, the lushness of its forests and size of its alligators, with a pride as if of ownership – are central to his self-conception. As *Outcast*’s narrator relates: “His [Lingard’s] river! By it he was not only rich – he was interesting. This secret of his which made him different to the other traders of those seas gave intimate satisfaction to that desire for singularity which he shared with the rest of mankind, without being aware of its presence within his breast” (155). Sambir is fundamental to Lingard’s sense of self, not just because it is under his power, but because it can be spoken of as such. The secret of how to navigate Sambir’s river gives him satisfaction not because, or not just because, it makes him different *from* other traders, but because it makes “him different *to* the other traders” (155, my emphasis). The role of the listening audience is thus pivotal in establishing the parameters of what might be called Lingard’s self-narration. Through his storytelling, Lingard formulates a sense of who he is as an individual, separate from and in relation to others.

At the same time, *Outcast* also portrays Lingard’s storytelling as part of a larger cycle through which imperialists perpetuate and justify their rule. Formed in the port city of Falmouth by a set of communities deeply enmeshed in the ideology of empire, Lingard is a product of “Sunday school teachings...and the discourses of the black-coated gentleman connected with the Mission to Fishermen and Seamen” (152-153). From these distinctly oral communities, Lingard inherited a missionary sense of his own righteousness and philanthropy. As *Outcast*’s narrator explains, “His

[Lingard's] experience appeared to him immense and conclusive, teaching him the lesson of the simplicity of life ... It being manifest that he was wise and lucky – otherwise how could he have been as successful in life as he had been? – he had an inclination to set right the lives of other people ...” (153). Lingard considers his success evidence of the validity of his worldview, and thus generously encourages young sailors to be like him.

This worldview that Lingard lives by and propagates privileges a paternalistic formulation of authority that justifies British colonization and rule, along with middle class Victorian values that support a capitalist economic system. The former clearly shapes Lingard's categorization of his relationship with the people of Sambir. As Lingard describes his role in Sambir to Willems, “You, see Willems, I brought prosperity to that place. I composed their quarrels, and saw them grow under my eyes. There's peace and happiness there. I am more master there than his Dutch Excellency down in Batavia ever will be when some day a lazy man-of-war blunders at last against the river. I mean to keep the Arabs out of it, with their lies and intrigues. I shall keep the venomous breed out, if it costs me my fortune” (37). Lingard's statement here is worth noting not only insofar as it expresses his belief that his rule in Sambir has benefited the people who live there, but also in its characterization of these people as being, like children, in a state of development that he, like a parent or guardian, oversees (“I...saw them grow under my eyes”). Moreover, one of the unspoken but clearly assumed premises of this statement is that the people of Sambir cannot rule themselves. The alternative possibilities of rule come from the Dutch, with their “lazy man-of-war,” and the Arabs, “with their lies

and their intrigues.” Thus, Lingard frames his determination to maintain his rule in Sambir, even at the cost of his fortune, as a particularly magnanimous act. Such a framing of empire as beneficial for the colonized anticipates the major theme of Rudyard Kipling’s well-known poem “White Man’s Burden” (1899), which highlights the colonizer as a sacrificial figure, willing to suffer while exercising his power for the good of unfortunate, less-civilized, and often ungrateful peoples. Yet Lingard’s own profit from his rule of Sambir is clear, both in terms of public notoriety and financial gain. Lingard’s earlier boast to Willems communicates this fact more clearly, as he says of Sambir: “D’ye see, I have them all in my pocket...My word is law – and I am the only trader” (36).<sup>34</sup>

Lingard also demonstrates a commitment to what could be categorized as a middle class ethic – a belief in the cultural narrative that hard work and singular dedication to a given purpose always earns its proper reward, typically in the form of financial success and public recognition. His commitment to such an idea is both described (and mocked) by the narrator’s categorization of him as one example of “the man of purpose,” a passage we will investigate at greater length in the next section. He not only narrativizes his own life, but also that of Willems, of whose success he is both proud and willing to take credit for, as a classic “pulled-up-by-the-bootstraps” tale. As he boasts of Willems, “Look at him. Confidential man of old Hudig. I picked him up in a ditch, you may say, like a starved cat. Skin and bone. ’Pon my word I did. And now he knows more than I do about island trading” (18). Such a narrative promotes the idea that those individuals who possess fortune and

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<sup>34</sup> For further perspectives on Lingard’s paternal attitude and its relation to imperialism, see Dryden (87-90) and Henthorne (53).

power do so because they are deserving; therefore, the current world order is as it should rightly be.

Both of these storytelling processes – Lingard’s vocal formulation of his subjectivity and his reproduction of the cultural narratives upon which this subjectivity is based – occur under a guise of transparency, under an assumption that Lingard reports lessons learned from experience and common sense, and thus that his stories convey absolute truths, rather than relative ideas. Conrad’s novel, however, undermines this assumption in several ways, one of which is the novel’s subtle deconstruction of the term “honesty.” This term first appears in the novel’s first sentence, where the text describes Willems as having “stepped off the straight and narrow path of his *peculiar honesty*” (7, emphasis mine). Jeremy Hawthorn regards this description as an immediate indication of Willems’ wayward ethics. How, asks Hawthorn, can honesty be “peculiar” to one person? To have one’s own peculiar honesty is not to be honest at all (Hawthorn 86). This is a valid point – there is a clear sense in the definition of the word “honesty” and its association with truthfulness that it should apply in the same way in all cases – yet, I see the novel’s overall deployment of “honesty” as ultimately calling the singularity this term into question. Perhaps, all “honesty” in *Outcast* is peculiar.

While the first sentence relates “honesty” to Willems, this term is most often associated with Lingard. From the “honest eyes” he turns upon listeners to his commitment to back his advice with actions “like an honest man,” Lingard’s association with “honesty” is part of a larger motif characterizing him as a “simple” man of the sea (Conrad, *Outcast* 18, 153, 152). This characterization, in turn, fits into

the larger paradigm of the imperial narrator. Andrea White's analysis of Captain James Cook, a prime example of an imperial narrator, draws to the fore Cook's insistence that he is a plain-speaking man of little book-learning, with no use for fancy words. This aversion to literary language gives him claim to being a more trustworthy witness. He isn't out to impress his audience; he just wants to represent the world as it truly is (A. White 15-16). He is a transparent observer of the facts, and thus what he reports must be true.

In a similar fashion, Lingard's authority as a storyteller, and thus the validity of the worldview he propounds, is rooted in the notion that Lingard is a "simple" man. Indeed, on one level, *Outcast* appears to juxtapose two kinds of European imperialists<sup>35</sup>: self-serving ones who seek power and wealth (e.g. Willems and Almayer) and more benevolent adventurer imperialists (e.g. Lingard). Lingard's aversion to letters seems to be a part of this juxtaposition. Writing appears associated with those who overtly exploit empire for profit and with treachery. Willems is skilled at figures. Hudig rules his trade empire from a writing desk. Almayer dreams of killing Willems by luring him into a trap with a letter. The state of Almayer's office mocks his faith in writing. Stocked upon Almayer's arrival with books, ink, and ledgers – all trappings of civilization that Almayer originally believes necessary for trade – this office has fallen into neglect, become a decaying "temple of an exploded superstition," as Almayer eventually recognizes these tools as useless for facilitating business in Sambir (Conrad, *Outcast* 232).

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<sup>35</sup> The specificity of "European" imperialists is important here, for, as J. H. Stape has recognized numerous non-European characters in this text also demonstrate a clear colonizing impulse, including Abdullah and even Aïssa (Stape xv, xviii-xix). An outsider who comes to Sambir looking for conquest, Lakamba belongs in this camp as well.



Lingard, in contrast, has little use for writing. His lack of interest in books is a testament to his authenticity and reliability: “To Lingard – simple himself – all things were simple. He seldom read. Books were not much in his way, and he had to work hard navigating, trading, and also, in obedience to his benevolent instincts, shaping stray lives he found here and there under his busy hand” (152). With a head uncluttered by books, Lingard is “simple.” He follows his “instincts.” He is one of those men of the “old sea” described at the novel’s beginning. Unlike landlubbers who live their narrow lives comfortably at desks, these men do not need “to open the book of life” to understand eternity, because they learn all they need from the sea (14). Uncorrupted by the greed that rules those who live according to pen and book, Lingard is a version of the natural man.

These examples establish a thesis that lies on the surface of Conrad’s text, a thesis that privileges beliefs that claim to be based on common sense and experience. Yet Lingard is both the most prominent example of one who propounds such beliefs and the linchpin that ultimately fails to hold them in place. Almayer’s decrepit “temple of an exploded superstition,” after all, eventually becomes home to Joanna, whom Lingard has Almayer lie to in order to hide news of Willems’ betrayal and affair with Aïssa. Her situation is, in part, precipitated by Lingard’s conviction of the inviolability of the patriarchal patterns that order his worldview. As he explains to Almayer, bringing Joanna to Sambir is the “[p]roper thing, of course. Wife, husband... together...as it should be...” (146). Described as a “slender and tall figure trailing to and fro the ragged tail of its white gown” as she walks the muddy riverside, Joanna invokes the image of a ghostly virgin bride; she becomes the new priestess in

European civilization's decaying temple (233). A precursor to *Heart of Darkness's* Intended – less sympathetically portrayed, perhaps, but a precursor nonetheless – Joanna is also one of a long line of people that Lingard lies to in order to maintain the communal narrative that is his reputation.

While such a connection implicitly calls into question the meaning of Lingard's "honesty" and, for that matter, the difference between Lingard and Willems/Almayer, the text interrogates Lingard's "honesty" on an even more explicit level by the various other storytellers who re-frame and re-present back to Lingard different versions of his own self-narrative. These re-presentations expose him to contradictions that undermine not only his sense of his own "honesty" but cast doubt upon those cultural beliefs that constitute the very foundation of his sense of self. Almayer, for example, challenges Lingard's claim to "honesty" during the storytelling scene in which he recounts how Willems sold them out, a euphemism that is made literal as Almayer describes how Willems broke into his home and sewed him up in a fishing net "like a bale of goods" (142). Angry with Lingard for his continued charity towards Willems, Almayer recounts several examples of Lingard's supposedly "heroic" past deeds. However, Almayer's retellings emphasize the ways in which Lingard's determination to play the hero consistently backfires to hurt the very people he is most responsible for protecting. A dog Lingard rescued from starvation had rabies and bit his serang. A group of men Lingard saved from a sinking ship turned out to be pirates and murdered half his crew. Fitting Lingard's patronage of Willems into this pattern – a pattern that paints Lingard as vain and foolish rather than heroic – Almayer repeatedly questions Lingard's "honesty": "And, besides, you

were not honest,” and later “Do you call that honest?” (125, 126). Almayer’s repeated questioning of Lingard’s “honesty,” framed by his retelling of these (un)heroic deeds, implies that, from Almayer’s perspective, Lingard has not always lived up to his reputation. At the same time, it opens the door for thinking about the possible contingency of that term.

Almayer is, of course, neither the most likeable nor the most virtuous character. To say the least, the appellation “honest” never appears by his name. Yet, Almayer’s reframing of Lingard’s heroism creates a new narrative that does hit home. Lingard at first scoffs at Almayer’s accusations. Reasserting the righteousness of his position according to patriarchal narratives, Lingard “serenely” dismisses Almayer’s complaints by feminizing him: “You scold like a drunken fish-wife” (127). Later, after a brief outburst of anger during which he breaks a table, Lingard again mocks Almayer, “don’t nag at me like a woman at a drunken husband” (134). Admitting at least partial fault with this second response, Lingard still clings to a notion of self defined by gendered stereotypes of male superiority. If he errs, he errs in a manly way, while Almayer’s concerns are that of a weak and annoying woman.

Lingard’s storytelling encounters with Babalatchi and Aïssa further call into question his “honesty” – this framing of Lingard as a simple man whose knowledge comes from firsthand experience. These encounters undermine the transparency of firsthand experience by highlighting how perception itself is circumscribed by pre-existing cultural narratives. When the betrayed Lingard arrives in Sambir searching for Willems, Babalatchi convinces him to enter his hut where “in a flowing monotone” he delivers “the narrative of the events in Sambir” from his own point of

view (172, 174). In the exchange that follows, Dryden and Henthorne have noted how in this scene Babalatchi reframes Lingard's paternal paradigm (Dryden 93; Henthorne 54). He proffers the terms "master" and "slave" as a description for the relation of Lingard to Sambir, as opposed to Lingard's "elder brother" or benefactor (Conrad, *Outcast* 174). However, what is also interesting about this exchange is that it draws attention to the limitations of Lingard's self-narrative using the language of perception. When Babalatchi asks Lingard if white men ever hear the voices of the dead, Lingard replies: "We do not... because those that we cannot see do not speak" (178). On the one hand, this quote can be interpreted as Lingard obviously intended: 'Ghosts don't exist, and thus we sensible white men don't hear their voices.' At the same time, this comment also invites us to consider all the examples *Outcast* presents of Lingard failing to see something right before his eyes – both literally, as when he later fails to see the decrepit old woman in Aïssa and Willems' courtyard, and more figuratively, as when Lingard fails to see Willems' personal faults until it is too late – a mistake Lingard himself thinks of as a "fatal blindness" (172). Moreover, that which cannot be seen often speaks in *Outcast*, often with palpable consequences. Babalatchi's voice leads Lingard to shore the night he seeks Willems. The old serving woman who Lingard fails to see emits a cry of "Beware!" that brings Aïssa from her hut. In what is perhaps one of the strongest examples aligning Lingard's literal and figurative blindness, we first meet Abdullah as a voice hailing Lingard from the dark in a scene where Lingard dismisses the idea that Abdullah could ever threaten his position in Sambir – a dismissal that later seems a little foolhardy. What is it that makes Lingard unable to see during his moments of figurative blindness (in other

words, in the moments when it's not just the dark)? I would suggest Lingard's "absurd faith in himself," in his view of the world, and in the stories that he tells (14).

Seeing and being seen, along with listening and being heard, are fundamental markers by which characters in *Outcast* recognize another's mutual claim to consciousness and humanity, and the storytelling scene is a site where the interconnection between perceiving, being perceived, and being embodied comes to a head. Lingard's subsequent storytelling encounter with Aïssa certainly suggests as much, as Aïssa reiterates the idea that Lingard lacks the ability to "see" beyond his own cultural paradigm. When Aïssa, fearing Lingard has come to kill Willems, attempts to dissuade him, Lingard refuses to listen. Instead he chastises her, referring to their respective roles in both their societies: "You are Omar's daughter and you ought to know that when men meet in daylight women must be silent and abide their fate" (186). In response, Aïssa challenges Lingard's dismissal of her because of her gender using the language of perception: "Yes, I am a woman! Your eyes see that, O Rajah Laut, but can you see my life?" (188). Aïssa then attempts to make Lingard "see her life" – to authorize herself to speak and be heard by telling the story of her escape with her father and Babalatchi. A recounting of Aïssa's experience with the violence of war and suffering on the sea, this brief narrative turns Lingard's gender and power paradigm on its head. In relating this story, Aïssa emphasizes her ownership of these experiences, using verbs that highlight her perceptions: "I also have heard...the voice of firearms...I also have felt the rain of...leaves cut up by bullets...I also know how to look in silence at angry faces...I also saw men fall dead around me...I have faced the heartless seas, held on my lap the heads of those who

died...” (188). Her rhythmically frequent use of the adverb “also” connects her experiences with Lingard’s own. She concludes with a testimony that her actions prove her equal to a man, as she relates how she took a paddle from a dead man and rowed “so that those with me did not know that one man more was dead” (188).

For a brief moment, Aïssa’s storytelling meets with success. Aïssa and Lingard briefly share the idealized kind of connection that face-to-face storytelling encounters are supposed to create. This moment of connection is also a moment of “seeing,” a moment of understanding that penetrates both outwards to another and inward to the self. The narrator describes Lingard looking into Aïssa’s eyes as “a double ray of her very soul streamed out in a fierce desire to light up the most obscure designs of his heart” (189). However, cultural contexts are reasserted, as Lingard reiterates “still you are a woman,” and later “I am white” (189). Admitting her status, Aïssa’s speech breaks off into pauses and ellipses: “Now I, I am a woman...” She is transformed. “...she seemed to have been changed into a breathless, an unhearing, and unseeing figure, without knowledge of fear or hope, of anger or despair” (189). Lingard not only refuses Aïssa’s claim of the authority to speak, but his reassertion of social codes seems to shift his own, and, for a brief instance, the reader’s perception of her as a living and conscious being. Literally now unheard and figuratively unseen, she appears an inhuman thing – unhearing, unseeing, unfeeling.

Bodies signify in this scene, but they do so in a fashion that drowns out another kind of seeing and connections made via the spoken word. Aïssa wants Lingard to hear her story so that he can “see” her on a level beyond physical context and social custom – but that is farther than Lingard’s eyes are willing to or capable of

penetrating. Aïssa's continued attempt to communicate with Lingard, remains for the most part what can only be called a missed connection; yet, it is worthwhile to note that her story does affect him. In fact, Lingard's apparent fear of hearing more of Aïssa's story – her declaration of what she has done for Willems' sake, which Lingard's suspects to be a "horrible confession" – causes him to quickly and unwillingly admit that he does not plan to kill Willems in order to stop her speech (196). Thus, Conrad's depiction of Lingard as an imperial narrator confronted not just by other storytelling voices, but other storytelling bodies, brings to the fore the limitations of this figure and the tradition to which it belongs. As central terms and ideas like honesty, simplicity, and the transparency of firsthand experience are drawn into question and/or revealed as culturally or contextually contingent, the imperial narrator's authority is brought into question.

The final storyteller who undermines Lingard's self-narrative is Willems. Like the previously mentioned tellers, Willems re-presents Lingard's narratives, but not because he desires to oppose or enlighten Lingard. He re-presents them because Willems too is a variation of the imperial narrator – a repetition that Lingard has in fact created. Like Lingard, Willems' sense of his individuality is intimately tied to the act of telling stories to his peers, ostensibly for the purpose of allowing others to learn from his example. As the narrator describes Willems' thoughts as he drunkenly stumbles home after an evening of billiards and story-sharing: "He believed in his genius and in his knowledge of the world. Others should know of it also; for their own good and for his greater glory. All those friendly men who slapped him on the

back and greeted him noisily should have the benefit of his example. For that he must talk” (9).

Willems’ loss of this public storytelling forum, precipitated by the discovery that he has been stealing from Hudig, reveals his overwhelming dependence on it. This need becomes, along with physical attraction, one of the cornerstones of Willems and Aïssa’s romance. Particularly during their early courtship, she provides him with an audience to and through which he can create a new self-projection. Their union is described as a kind of mutual triumph and subjugation. Willems performs a “gradual taming of that woman by the words of his love,” while Aïssa claims her “new conquest” by “listening to his words, holding him with her look” (60, 59, 59). Willems tells his stories stretched out at Aïssa’s feet, a position clearly indicating a kind of subservience of speaker to listener. The narrative Willems communicates to Aïssa is one that fits both their desires – Willems’ for redemption from an unjust fate, and Aïssa’s for an explanation of how she can love this white man and yet hate his people. As *Outcast*’s narrator explains: “She could not understand all he told her of his life, but the fragments she understood she made up for herself into a story of a man great amongst his own people, valorous and unfortunate; an undaunted fugitive dreaming of vengeance against his enemies” (59).

As Dryden has noted, Willems’ treatment of the Da Souzas is a clear, though more explicitly brutal, reflection of Lingard’s treatment of the people of Sambir (Dryden 88). Willems formulates his sense of entitlement over the Da Souzas through the same patriarchal narrative of a commanding but benevolent father figure who distributes protection and demands obedience. In a way, Willems is an abject



reflection of Lingard. He is shaped by the same narratives, ruled by the same desires for power and public approbation. Lingard eventually recognizes his role in Willems' development and betrayal, or, perhaps more threateningly for Lingard, he realizes that others will recognize his role and his reputation, which is really just the conglomeration of stories told by others about Lingard, will be irrevocably damaged. Thus, Lingard sentences Willems to a living death, exiling him to Sambir. As Lingard tells Willems, "As far as the rest of the world is concerned ... your life is finished. Nobody will be able to throw any of your villainies in my teeth; nobody will be able to point at you and say, 'Here goes a scoundrel of Lingard's up-bringing.' You are buried here" (Conrad, *Outcast* 214). This metaphoric, or perhaps we could say social, burying of Willems initiates a significant shift in the paradigm of the imperial narrator's power, as it is presented in Lingard. At *Outcast's* beginning, Lingard's stories held at their center a silence fundamental to his speaking authority – the secret knowledge of how to navigate Sambir's river. The revelation of this secret breaks Lingard's hold over Sambir and his self-projection as its benefactor. Willems himself, the abject reflection of Lingard, becomes the new silence behind the imperial narrator's self-story.

### **Unsettling Narration as an Early Model of Modernist Storytelling**

*Outcast* is a story of storytelling's failure within an imperial context. This failure occurs not only at the level of communication, but also at the level of perception. It highlights how cultural narratives shape an individual's ability to perceive the world, and thus foreclose the kinds of stories that individual is able to tell

and understand. In Conrad's novel, this kind of blindness is most egregiously displayed precisely by those individuals whose social and economic position allows them to be the most mobile, those individuals, like Lingard and Willems, whose position of power within an imperial system allows them to navigate – at least for a time – without an awareness of alternative points-of-view. However, it would be a mistake to proceed as if Conrad's novel could contemplate how European, and specifically British, imperialist cultural narratives circumvent understanding of self and other without having to wrestle with the way that these narratives themselves comprise the text's own discourse. Genre, literary tradition, narrative convention – all are born of and sustain larger cultural systems that both communicate and constitute knowledge. The idea that it would be possible for an author to consciously step outside this system, formulate an independent understanding of the self, and then communicate it without reference to preexisting tradition and convention, is doubtful, but not a question that it is necessary to debate here. It is sufficient to make the point that Conrad does work within a preexisting tradition, that he must and does navigate the imperialist cultural narratives that are inherent in it.

A sure sign that Conrad wrestles with such preexisting narratives throughout his career is that his novels were so often subject to contradictory readings, particularly by his contemporaries. In this respect, *Outcast* is no exception. While some of Conrad's reviewers clearly sensed that Lingard did not fit the traditional paradigm of the imperial hero, more than one expressed a view of Lingard closer to Lingard's own lofty self-narration. The unsigned reviewer of the May 30, 1896, edition of *The Spectator*, for example, raves about Lingard: "There is, however, one

grand character in the book – that of the old seaman Tom Lingard. This personage, who is conceived on the colossal scale of primitive romance, looms through the lurid atmosphere of crime and sensuality like a legendary type of rugged, incorruptible manhood” (Sherry 78). Similarly, the anonymous reviewer for the April 4, 1896, *The Daily Mail* calls Lingard the “benefactor” of Sambir, and James Payn in his review for the April 4, 1896, edition of *The Illustrated London News* calls Lingard “a great white trader” and “a noble character” (68, 67, 67). In contrast, the reviewer for the April 18, 1896 edition of *The National Observer* found Lingard “not impressive,” while the reviewer for the July 18, 1896 *Athenaeum*, although he considered Lingard to have a “certain grandeur of purpose,” considered the overall “moral atmosphere” to be “magnificently sordid” (70, 79, 79, 79).

Such contradictory evaluations of this text lends support to Brian Richardson’s argument that “Conrad’s fiction...often seems to create two or more different and opposed implied readers” (Richardson, “Conrad and the Reader” 2). In the case of *Outcast*, there were those readers who approached the texts via the generic expectations of the imperial romance. Displaying a similar kind of blindness to that of Lingard, their culturally determined expectations prevent them from sensing the ways in which *Outcast* presents a very different kind of imperial story. At the same time, others recognized the ways in which *Outcast* departed from the norm, providing them with the opportunity to recognize the text’s critique of imperialism. I argue that the focus drawn to storytelling, and to Lingard as an imperial narrator in particular, is key to understanding Conrad’s own attempt to simultaneously work within and navigate around the conventions that dictate expectations for not only story-content but story-

form – that is, not only what stories say, but how they say it. Conrad’s portrayal of storytelling in *Outcast* draws attention to his own act of storytelling as a novelist and the techniques he employs, particularly the construction of the third-person limited omniscient narrator who relates nearly the entirety of Conrad’s tale.

Third person narrators are notoriously difficult to talk about. Certainly the amount of scholarly attention paid to Conrad’s first-person narrators outstrips discussion of his third-person ones by fathoms. Moreover, critical work to date related to third-person narration by Conrad has focused almost exclusively on the novel that follows *Outcast*, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’: A Tale of the Sea* (1897), and the intriguing shift that occurs as the narrator switches among perspectives marked by the first-person singular (“I saw”), first-person plural (“we saw”), and third-person (“they saw”).<sup>36</sup> Yet, while the narration of *Outcast* may not demonstrate the same overtly experimental impulse as *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, I argue that it presents an important literary development in its own right. A closer look at the narrator of *Outcast* reveals a kind of instability that is distinctly modernist in nature.

The third-person narrator of *Outcast* delivers what I call an “unsettling narration.” “Unsettling narration” is related to, but distinct from, the idea of “unreliable narration.” As readers, we call a narrator “unreliable” when we know that we cannot trust what it tells us, when we have grounds to believe that the state of a storyworld or an event is not as the narrator describes. Often, based on internal

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<sup>36</sup> Scholarly works addressing third-person narration in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* are too numerous to all be listed here; however, a few are particularly worth mentioning as they see Conrad engaging in a kind of narrative experimentalism that crosses borders between a Victorian, modernist, and even a postmodernist aesthetic. Michael Levenson’s article “The Modernist Narrator on the Victorian Ship” (1983) argues that narration of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* represents a transition point between the Victorian-Arnoldian desire for “order and community” and the “modernizing habits’ of individualism and class antagonism” (Levenson, “Modernist” 101-102). Brian Richardson argues in “Conrad and Posthumanist Narration” (2005) that the narration of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* anticipates the anti-mimetic methods of postmodernism (Richardson, “Conrad and Posthumanist” 220).

evidence, we can piece together possible explanations of what has actually taken place. As Dorrit Cohn has noted, unreliable narration occurs far more often in first-person narratives than in third, or – as Cohn, following Genette, puts it – in homodiegetic narration, stories told by someone involved in the story, than in heterodiegetic, stories told by someone not directly part of the storyworld (D. Cohn, *Distinction* 126-129). With a nod to Félix Martínez-Bonati, Cohn posits a methodology for determining the reliability of a heterodiegetic narrator by comparing the two different strata of the narrator’s language: “mimetic sentences, which create the image of the fictive world – its events, characters, and objects – and nonmimetic sentences, which create nothing more nor less than the image of the narrator’s mind” (129). When these two strata of language do not match, the narrator becomes suspect. The narrator of *Outcast*, however, complicates this formula. With him this distinction between mimetic versus nonmimetic can be difficult to determine. Indeed, in light of the connection Conrad posits between perception and cultural narratives, one might question whether mimesis is possible. How can one deliver a mimetic description if one’s perceptions are limited?

“Unsettling narration” is a step beyond unreliability into the realm of uncertainty. The reader suspects the narration is unreliable, but is uncertain how she can clearly judge. In this way, this concept of unsettling narration resembles Margot Norris’s description of the “suspicious readings” inspired by narrators in Joyce’s *Dubliners* (Norris 8-10). However, whereas Norris looks to moments of factual

inconsistency, where statements by the narrator and characters contradict,<sup>37</sup> I see the dependability of *Outcast*'s narrator as becoming an issue during moments of dissonance where the narrator disagrees with himself, undercuts his own statements, or leaves the reader uncertain as to whether a particular utterance is or is not the narrator's own thoughts. I use the word "unsettling" to describe this kind of narration because this word indicates a sense of the discomfort it raises in the reader. This term is also appropriate because, with "settle" as its root, it implies a breakdown of comfortably established beliefs that has implications for the colonial mindset. Unsettling narration raises questions concerning the reliability of not just a particular individual but of an entire way of seeing the world.

*Outcast*'s third-person narrator demonstrates a consistent habit of undermining both its own statements and generic expectations. Its ambivalent description of the "man of purpose" in Part III offers an illuminating example (Conrad, *Outcast* 152). This passage begins by expounding the virtue of steadfastness, the idea that dedicating oneself wholly to a purpose is the key to success, a concept no doubt so familiar to the middle-class Victorian reader as to be considered a kind of maxim. The narrator states, "Consciously or unconsciously, men are proud of their firmness, steadfastness of purpose, directness of aim. They go straight towards their desire, to the accomplishment of virtue – sometimes of crime – in an uplifting persuasion of their firmness" (152). The parallel structure of the first sentence ("proud of their firmness, steadfastness of purpose, directness of aim") creates a sense of persistence, even as the reader recognizes the familiar trope

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<sup>37</sup> For example, Norris points out the blatant untruth of the statement by the narrator of "The Dead" that Aunt Julia is the lead soprano in the choir at Adam and Eve's Church, as a starting point to signal that readers should be suspicious (Norris 233).

praising tenacity. However, the subsequent aside set off by dashes (“- sometimes of crime -”) disrupts this familiar message by highlighting how this middle-class value can equally benefit those aiming to do wrong. The narrator then presents a positive-negative balance, stating that men of purpose are both “generally honest” and “invariably stupid” (152). By the passage’s end, however, the balance falls to the negative, as it concludes: “Traveling on, he [the man of purpose] ... grasps the reward of his perseverance, of his virtue, of his healthy optimism: an untruthful tombstone over a dark and soon forgotten grave” (152).

Such moments are related to, but a step beyond, the irony Henthorne identifies in the text’s depiction of white colonists, such as when the narrator describes Almayer and Willems as “specimens of the superior race” that glare “at each other savagely” (qtd. Henthorne 54). Here, Conrad simultaneously critiques Almayer and Willems and the imperialist assumption of white superiority. Yet during passages such as the description of the “man of purpose,” the narrator’s effect reaches even more broadly. It aims both outward and inward, undermining both imperialist cultural narratives and the role that the novel, particularly novels of the imperial romance genre, play in sustaining them. As White notes, adventure fictions were considered more respectable in the nineteenth-century than typical popular novels. Victorians considered them educational since they provided information about previously unknown lands and moral lessons to prepare young British men to civilize them (A. White 40-45). In *Outcast*, the exhortation to steadfastly apply oneself becomes a kind of parody; the text invokes this truism only to reveal it as false. Moreover, while the passage subsequently identifies Lingard as the man of purpose (“Lingard had never hesitated

in his life”), it also invariably points to Willems (Conrad, *Outcast* 152). The offsetting of the reference to “crime” by dashes recalls how Willems’ crime appears in the novel’s first paragraph: “It was going to be a short episode – a sentence in brackets, so to speak – in the flowing tale of his life” (7).<sup>38</sup> The mentioned “untruthful tombstone over a dark and soon forgotten grave” also foreshadows Willems’ fate, as he is buried on an obscure hilltop under a stone with the epigraph “Delivered by the Mercy of God from his Enemy” (152, 278). Again, the text emphasizes that the man of purpose is not necessarily an admirable being.

Unsettling, as it does, both the values and the function of the imperial romance within British society, at such moments the narrator of *Outcast* exposes itself as a kind of generic and ideological contradiction – an anti-romantic narrator telling a romantic tale. In fact, this habit of highlighting generic expectations by undermining them makes the narrator of *Outcast* distinctively modernist. It exposes the constructed nature of the cultural narratives through which it sees and describes the world.

Of course, the narrator is not always as emphatically clear in undercutting its deployment of romantic or imperialist narratives as it is in the above example. In the passage describing Babalatchi’s thoughts after Omar’s death, it is difficult to tell whether the narrator is endorsing or critiquing the typical imperialist assumption of European superiority. The passage reads:

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<sup>38</sup> For an illuminating discussion of this quote, see Jeremy Hawthorn’s earlier mentioned article “Life Sentences: Linearity and Its Discontents in *An Outcast of the Islands*” (2008). Hawthorn explores the various ways *An Outcast* highlights metaphors of linearity – including the road, the sentence, narrative progression, and reading/writing the novel itself – in order to highlight how they are similar to, and different from, the human experience of the temporal world. As Hawthorn explains, “One of the effects of this strategy of making these patterns overt is that the reader has a sense of the ways in which living a life is both like and unlike the process of reading a book – especially with regard to issues of choice and moral responsibility” (Hawthorn 98).



The mind of the savage statesman [Babalatchi] ... felt for a moment the weight of his loneliness with keen perception worthy of even a sensibility exasperated by all the refinements of tender sentiment that a glorious civilisation brings in its train, among other blessings and virtues, into this excellent world. For the space of about thirty seconds, a half-naked, betel-chewing pessimist stood upon the bank of the tropical river ... a man angry, powerless, empty-handed, with a cry of bitter discontent ready on his lips; a cry that, had it come out, would have rung through the virgin solitudes of the woods, as true, as great, as profound, as any philosophical shriek that ever came from the depths of an easy-chair to disturb the impure wilderness of chimneys and roofs. (166)

On the one hand, this description reiterates cultural narratives positing Europeans as enlightened beings capable of self-reflection and natives as savages who, except for rare, brief moments of revelation such as Babalatchi experiences here, are ruled by instinct and lack introspection. Yet, at the same time, certain turns of phrase used by the narrator open the possibility of an ironic reading. Certainly, the grandiose language that the narrator employs in describing the European mindset (“a sensibility exasperated by all the refinements of tender sentiment that a glorious civilisation brings in its train, among other blessings and virtues, into this excellent world”) is overblown enough to warrant the possibility of sarcasm. Moreover, this avowal of the “blessings and virtues” of “glorious civilisation” jars distinctly with the “philosophical shriek” that rises “from the depths of an easy-chair” (166). Couched in

the “impure wilderness of chimneys and roofs,” does the European mind have greater insight into the human condition, and is such insight a blessing (166)? Is the narrator asserting Babalatchi’s limitations, or highlighting how such cultural narratives limit his ability to represent Babalatchi’s consciousness?

Such vagueness as to whether the narrator supports or ironizes imperialist cultural narratives is yet another aspect of *Outcast*’s unsettling narration. It leaves Conrad open to accusations that he propounds at some points the very kinds of stereotypes that he apparently undercuts at others; yet it also, by drawing attention to this possible contradiction, highlights both the narrator itself as a mediating, rather than a transparent, storytelling agent and the existence of such stereotypes as applied narratives rather than mimetic descriptions. Moreover, for those readers who recognize both potential interpretations, this passage presents a point of narration where the shadows of two different readings overlap. While one reading may appear stronger, the possibility of the second prevents the reader from confidently settling on the first.

This idea of overlapping readings leads into the last of the ways in which I categorize the narration of *Outcast* as “unsettling.” While the reader of the traditional Victorian novel could for the most part depend upon the narrator to provide both reliable description and interpretive guidance, the narrator of *Outcast* undermines this dependability at certain points by being unclear as to whether it is expressing its own thoughts, opinions, or descriptions or whether it is expressing those of a character through which it is focalizing. The effect of this uncertainty is particularly unsettling in a text where the idea that cultural narratives circumvent perception is in circulation.

A clear example of this indeterminate focalization comes during the first description of the Da Souza family in the opening pages of the novel. Although we are not provided with Willems' name until the end of the opening paragraph, it is clear that parts of this introductory passage express Willems', rather than the narrator's, point-of-view, even though they are articulated by the narrator, while other parts of the passage appear to be the narrator's own descriptions, often of Willems' and his state-of-mind. As readers, we know that some of the insight we are given into Willems' mind originates with the narrator because we are told things of which Willems himself is not aware. For example, the narrator explains Willems' attitude towards the Da Souza's: "He [Willems] did not analyse his state of mind, but probably his greatest delight lay in the unexpressed but intimate conviction that, should he close his hand, all those admiring human beings would starve" (Conrad, *Outcast* 8). At the same time, this introductory paragraph also contains numerous examples of statements that express Willems' own thoughts and perspective. The very assertion that "the Da Souza family's admiration was the great luxury of his [Willems'] life" contains an expression that must belong to Willems', as the omniscient narrator already knows (and readers will soon find out) that the Da Souza family does not in fact admire Willems at all (7). Indeed, much of the first paragraph expresses an assurance of Willems' righteous position in the world that indicates we are being presented with a mixture of Willems' own thoughts and the narrator's observations, making the passage an example of free indirect discourse<sup>39</sup> rather than just straight descriptive narration.

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<sup>39</sup> I use this term according to the definition provided by Gerald Prince in his *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Free indirect discourse is "a type of discourse representing a character's utterance or thoughts," which is presented by

At certain points, particularly when describing the Da Souza family, it is impossible to tell whether statements have their origin in Willems' consciousness or belong to the narrator. For example:

They were a numerous and unclean crowd...He kept them at arm's length and even further off, perhaps, having no illusions as to their worth. There were a half-caste, lazy lot, and he saw them as they were – ragged, lean, unwashed undersized men of various ages, shuffling about aimlessly in slippers; motionless old women who looked like monstrous bags of pink calico stuffed with shapeless lumps of fat...young women, slim and yellow, big-eyed, long-haired, moving languidly amongst the dirt and rubbish as if every step they took was going to be their very last. (7)

Certainly, this passage relates a number of stereotypes often applied by Europeans during this time to both indigenous peoples of Empire and persons of mixed European and non-European descent, particularly in tropical climes. Unclean and indolent, they appear incapable of self-care. Yet it is unclear from the statement itself whether this description belongs to Willems, whose soon to be revealed as erroneous self-perception gives the reader ground to doubt his presentation of others, or to the third-person narrator, who in Victorian fiction typically provides what are assumed to be transparent descriptions. Moreover, in its very insistence on the accuracy of the perception it relates (“having no illusions...he saw them as they were...”), this passage highlights the possibility of misperception. Rather than “he saw them as” or

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the narrator without an indicating tag phrase such as “he thought” (Prince 34). Although the opening paragraph of *Outcast* does in fact contain several statements with such tag phrases (“He imagined,” “He fancied”), it also contains statements that represent Willems' thoughts without such indicators.

“they were,” phrases which would have provide, if not a decisive indication as to the perspective, at least a less dubious one, the avowal that “he saw them as they were” leaves open the question of whether the narrator is agreeing with Willems’ perception or Willems is merely adamantly asserting the validity of his own assessment. Similar to the question of whether the narrator’s description of Babalachi after Omar’s death carries some notes of irony, this kind of uncertainty over who is the origin for this description draws attention to the device of the narrator, but not in a way that bolsters the narrator’s authority.

Before concluding this section, I would like to address for a moment the connection between this pattern of what I am calling “unsettling narration” and the reception of this particular text by Conrad’s contemporaries. As mentioned earlier, Conrad’s *Outcast*, like numerous other works in his oeuvre, was subject to readings by contemporary book reviewers who found it to be a pro-imperialist work. Obviously, such reviewers did not find either Conrad’s narration or his depiction of the imperial project “unsettling” in the way that I am arguing it to be. However, I find possible support for the idea that at least some of Conrad’s contemporaries did in fact find the narration of this text “unsettling” in some way in the reoccurring complaint that Conrad’s writing in *Outcast* is, as the anonymous reviewer in the May 6, 1896, edition of *Sketch* phrases it, “nebulously diffused,” that Conrad’s apparent insistence on minute physical and psychological description results in a wordiness that makes his meaning vague rather than precise (Sherry 70).<sup>40</sup> The anonymous review in the

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<sup>40</sup> This review goes on to state: “To paint a field he [Conrad] must needs paint every blade of grass with pre-Raphaelite minuteness, while he observes through a microscope every thought that floats, however casually, through the minds of his personages. That the painting is done either exquisitely or powerfully is unquestionable, but its over-elaboration defeats itself” (Sherry 71). Similarly, according to the anonymous review in the March 13, 1896, edition of *The Daily Chronicle*: “Mr. Conrad has been justly commended for his skill in depicting a situation

April 18, 1896, edition of *The National Observer* complains that Conrad, “seems to lose grip of his subject. The story melts away among a desert of words...”(69). This same review complains of a lack of “crispness” in Conrad’s depiction of actions and of characters (70). While it certainly seems a valid criticism of *Outcast* to say that it can be wordy at certain points, I also believe that this rather widespread perception by Conrad’s contemporaries that this particular text lacks tightness or clarity is also a reaction to the ambiguity and, at times, the outright contradictions created by *Outcast*’s unsettling narration. Certainly the above cited passage describing Babalatchi’s state after Omar’s death, with its arguably over-elaborate use of over-enthusiastic adjectives and adjectival phrases, would fit the complaint descriptions offered by many of these early critics. Yet it is exactly these adjectives and adjectival phrases that introduce the possibility of ambiguity and thus make the reading unsettled.

### **“De mortuis nil ni...num”: Beyond the Imperial Narrator**

Conrad’s *Outcast* presents a critique and ultimately portrays the downfall of the imperial narrator. The betrayal of Willems and loss of Sambir means more to Lingard than just the loss of a valuable trade market. They precipitate the loss of narratives that scaffold a particular worldview and subjectivity. The uprising in Sambir not only forces Lingard into a world where he must now compete economically with other traders, but, for the first time, he must compete as a

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and its environment. He must be on his guard, however, against over-insistence in points of detail. We note a tendency here and there in the present volume towards superfluity. Some of the descriptive passages are a trifle over-wrought, touches are added to what is already complete, and the surplusage weakens the whole picture” (64). Even H. G. Wells, in his unsigned review for the May 16, 1896, edition of *The Saturday Review* – which is primarily full of praise – provides examples of what he sees as Conrad’s use of a “trampling army corps of depended clauses,” which undercut the clarity of his meaning (74).

storyteller as well. No longer in a position of sole power, we see over the course of the novel Lingard increasingly being exposed to alternative points-of-view that challenge his own stories. It is thus not particularly a surprise at the end of the novel that Lingard disappears completely. The final scene of the novel features Almayer “telling the story of the great revolution of Sambir” several years after the death of Willems to a drunken naturalist, who is supposedly writing a scientific book on tropical countries (Conrad, *Outcast* 275). Almayer reports that, having lost hold on Sambir, Lingard attempted a gold-expedition and, when that failed, vanished into Europe, “disappearing as though he had been a common coolie” (277). This unresolved mystery of the imperial narrator’s final fate is itself unsettling, both in its mystery and in the position that it leaves Lingard. As he can be confirmed neither dead nor alive, Lingard has become simply absent; there is no storytelling body to carry its tale back to England. The imperial narrator’s univocal storytelling cannot continue, at least not within this narrative. The traditional pattern of the imperial narrator returning home to share his story and encourage the next generation of imperial adventurers and tale-tellers is disrupted. Unlike the sailor in Millais’ “The Boyhood of Raleigh,” we have no record of Lingard addressing the eager, upturned faces of budding imperialists as they sit on the British shore.

Conrad’s dissolution of this figure who carried such weight in the late-nineteenth century both participates in and is indicative of a repositioning of the storyteller and of the act of storytelling within British cultural consciousness. One might even say that in *Outcast*, Conrad’s own storytelling apparatus responds to this shift as well. In contrast to the traditional Victorian narrator, consistent in its ability to

offer both mimetic descriptions and moral guidance, the unsettling narration of *Outcast* is inconsistent. It contradicts itself, changes its mind, and refuses to differentiate between expressing sincerity and sarcasm.

Before concluding, I think it important to recognize the ways in which Conrad's other writings, both professional and personal, complicate his relation to the figure of the imperial narrator and reveal what I see as a distinctly modernist paradox concerning authority. While the crux of Conrad's critique of the imperial narrator in *Outcast* rests on undermining this figure's claims to the transparency and authenticity based on first-hand experience, Conrad, and his contemporary literary supporters, at times employed interestingly similar tactics in promoting his work. Conrad's early works in particular were marketed largely as fictions of empire. Echoing the sentiment Lang's earlier quoted praise that the surge in recent writers of imperial fiction had "seen new worlds for themselves," an article on Conrad in an 1896 issue of *The Bookman* argues for the quality of Conrad's work on similar grounds: "It will not surprise readers of *Almayer's Folly*...to learn that its author has led an adventurous life. Material for such books can only be brought to the writing table by the track of personal experience. It is unmistakably the book of a wanderer who has lived far from the ways and the atmosphere of European capitals..." (qtd. A. White 8; Sherry 72). Conrad himself at times employed the idea that he learned what he knew of life from experience, particularly on the sea, rather than from books, in his self-presentation as a storyteller. Despite the fact that Conrad was extremely well-read in several languages, he writes in a July 1895 letter to Paul Briquet, another aspiring writer: "You have the advantage of youth over me, and also of knowing many things



with which I am not acquainted. You have read many books. I myself have read only one great page, the enormous and monotonous page filled by a life passed entirely outside myself, oblivious of my own individuality, in a struggle with the mysterious and various powers which oppose us” (Conrad, *Collected* 232).

One might argue that such statements align Conrad with Lingard and the idea of the imperial narrator in their claim of authority based on experience and their rather disdainful regard for book-learning. However, given Conrad’s treatment of the imperial narrator in *Outcast*, I see these statements not as placing Conrad in the same boat as tale-tellers like Lingard, but as demonstrating Conrad’s awareness that, as an aspiring writer, he could invoke particular cultural narratives in creating his own literary identity. In a paradoxical move that we shall see in other modernist writers as well, Conrad usurps the authority of a traditional storytelling figure, the imperial narrator, while calling the very basis of that authority into question.

Given this novel’s focus on storytelling and its own experiments with narration, what can we make of Conrad’s decision to end with a coda delivered by, of all people, Almayer? On the one hand, it is difficult to read the final pages of *Outcast* and not feel as though it ends on a dark note, with the last storytelling scene taking place between a decidedly un-heroic speaker, who we already know from Conrad’s previous novel is destined for a selfish and sad fate, and a drunken listener, a supposed naturalist who we are told will soon die of fever. Is this a new storytelling figure for the new century, the replacement for the vanished imperial narrator?

The answer is both yes and no. Certainly we see in Conrad’s presentation of Almayer’s storytelling in this coda some of the characteristics that will become

hallmarks of Marlow, such as repeating the stories of others to supplement his own tale with information about events he did not directly witness. However, Conrad's very use of this technique during the coda represents an opening up of the imperial narrative. Almayer's final storytelling scene is not only a coda, it is a requiem to mark the passing of a certain type of storytelling, a certain, unquestioning type of reading, and a certain narrow way of seeing the world. The drunken scientist who listens to Almayer attempts, and fails, to quote the Latin saying, "De mortuis nil nisi bonum" ("De mortuis nil nisi bonum" or "Of the dead speak nothing but good") (277). The immediate referent of the quote is Willems, but it can also be extended to the vanished Lingard and to the imperial narrator more broadly, a category into which both Willems and Lingard fit. The use of a Latin quote reminds the reader of another powerful but fallen empire, that of Rome, and invites the reader to see both a parallel in the diminishment of the British empire and to see the role of the imperial narrator in that fall. The storyteller we are left with, Almayer, is, of course, no Marlow – but his story, and the story of Lingard's failure, are ones that had to be told in order to make a space for a storyteller like Marlow, whose authority rests in part in the admission of uncertainty and of the potential limitations of his own vision.

### Chapter 3

#### Modern Mythmaking: Re-Plotting Tradition in Rebecca West's *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy*

While the imperial narrator draws his authority from a notion of bodily presence and firsthand experience as he tells tales of the far reaches of empire, the ideologies that shape how he perceives and presents these experiences originate at “home,” within his own culture. Rebecca West’s 1929 novel *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* asserts a relationship between the kinds of ideologies that govern the United Kingdom’s policies abroad and those that govern the most intimate relations among individuals within its borders. Like Conrad, West posits a connection between the act of the storytelling and the process of subject formation, and her work is suffused by an awareness of how individual bodies and groups of people function within representational systems, or scripts, that make them readable. For West, the concept of “tradition,” as the cumulative cultural inheritance of a given society, is this social script, one that West sees as both necessary for individuals to formulate a sense of being in the world and potentially harmful as it can perpetuate oppressive cultural narratives.

In this chapter, I show how West uses oral storytelling to present an argument for the potential of art to rewrite cultural constructions of gender and uneven hierarchies of power – to change tradition by working from within it. Through her depiction of Harriet Hume, a female storyteller gifted with the ability to read her male listener’s mind, West presents an artist-heroine who is at once the storytelling subject and gendered object of cultural narratives of an idealized and oppressive notion of femininity. Speaking from a position marked by a double awareness of self and self-

as-other, Harriet uses her listener's patriarchal expectations to influence him, even as she subtly undermines these expectations and presents the possibility of re-plotting tradition itself.

Rebecca West (1892-1983) was viewed as a gifted and incendiary writer by her contemporaries. The passage of time has done little to smooth the rough edges of controversy that makes her one of the twentieth-century's most intriguing figures. Compared to other writers of her generation – T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf come to mind – West has been sorely neglected, despite her monumental status as a critic, novelist, political activist, and public personality.<sup>41</sup> The reasons behind this neglect are complex. West lived and wrote well into her old age, making it difficult to categorize her by time period. Her works cut across a variety of genres, including both fiction (novels and short stories) and nonfiction (journalism, literary and cultural criticism, and travel narratives). She thus defies the traditional paradigm of modernism as divided along lines of high and popular culture. Moreover, and,

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<sup>41</sup> This tide has been slowly turning, although West still widely lacks the critical recognition in comparison to her contemporaries. Several important works over the last two decades have argued for West as a central figure within modernism. Perhaps the most notable among these critical works is Bonnie Kime Scott's two-volume work *Refiguring Modernism* (1995), which offers an alternative paradigm for understanding the trajectory of modernism through the web of associations formed by the works and lives of Woolf, West, and Djuna Barnes. In addition, some significant critical works dedicated solely to West have been published, including Ann V. Norton's *Paradoxical Feminism* (2000), Bernard Schweizer's *Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion, and the Female Epic* (2002), and the collection *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches* (2006). Also worth mentioning are two collections, *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (1994), edited by Lisa Rado, and *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-30* (2000), edited by Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton. The former is a reflective collection written after a decade and a half of feminist efforts to challenge what many perceived as the academy's masculine formulation of modernism, with the stated goal of addressing the questions now most central to feminist-modernist scholars of its day. The two essays it features on West present her formulation of tradition (Stetz's "Rebecca West's Criticism: Alliance, Tradition and Modernism") and her response to Joyce's *Ulysses* (Scott's "A Joyce of Ones Own: Following the Lead of Woolf, West, and Barnes") as central to a fuller understanding to modernism. The second collection offers a reevaluation of the early twentieth century novel by juxtaposing modernism and realism, not as opposing time periods, but as co-existing literary techniques. Lyn Pykett's essay from this collection on West and May Sinclair argues that the work of these two early twentieth-century women writers maintains a dialogue with the New Women writers of the Victorian era, rather than dismissing and attempting to distance themselves from Victorian realism as male modernists do. Although these works ultimately hold slightly different foci and approaches than my own, these critics share my view that West's central importance as an early twentieth-century writer stems from the way in which she develops and engages with a formulation of the past that is present in, continuous with, and defining of the present.

perhaps, more importantly, her vocal criticism of modernism's leading men, particularly Eliot and Joyce, has caused her at times to be labeled as a reactionary against literary innovation and has contributed to a large scale blindness towards the experimental nature of her work. Lastly, West's complicated politics and stance on gender made her a problematic figure for many feminists of the 1970s, 80s and 90s who were involved in the movement to recover previously neglected female modernists. As a leader in this movement and advocate for West's work, Bonnie Kime Scott noted that, despite West's early dedication to the suffragist cause, she "has been found unsatisfactory on a number of counts by recent feminists" (B. Scott, *Refiguring 2*: 125). Feminists critical of West point to her apparent ambivalence towards homosexuality, to her vocal support of McCarthyism during the 1950's,<sup>42</sup> and, perhaps most damning, to the accusation that her essentialist representations of gender in her fiction undermined her activism and journalistic work on behalf of women's rights.

It is this last point that I would like to briefly draw out here in order to open a larger conversation concerning West's view of the relationship between the authority of tradition and the function of art within contemporary society. This conversation both provides the context for and establishes the issues at stake in West's representation of her own art, the art of storytelling, as portrayed in *Harriet Hume*. I propose that we can see West as a writer wrestling with questions concerning the relationships between identity, culture, and the physical body. While the nature of her

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<sup>42</sup> The exact nature and virulence of West's views of homosexuality are still a matter of critical debate. For two contrary perspectives on this topic, see Victoria Glendinning's discussion in her West biography, *Rebecca West: A Life* (1987), and Jane Marcus' article "A Voice of Authority" in the collection *Faith of a (Woman) Writer* (1988). For an informative and engaging account of the motivations behind West's support of Senator Joseph McCarthy, see Carl Rollyson's preface "Rebecca West's Politics: A Biographical Perspective" in *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches* (2006).

struggle with such questions seems to have made some critics slow to embrace West as a fellow feminist, ultimately it makes her centrally important within a maturing modernist movement still struggling with issues of authority and an illuminating figure through which to understand it.

West's *Harriet Hume* is a novel deeply engaged with the very issues of representation that make West problematic for many. Just a brief glance at the back cover synopsis of the 1980 Virago Modern Classic edition of *Harriet Hume* demonstrates this. Harriet Hume is described as "the essence of femininity – magical, mystical, musical." Her "opposite" is the "brilliant and ambitious young politician," Arnold Condorex, whose lust for power causes him to reject Harriet's love and ultimately seek to destroy her. This story of an adverse relationship between a female musician and a male politician reinforces several gendered binaries. Victoria Glendinning, West's biographer, describes Harriet as "undiluted femininity – flexible, unaggressive, passive, anarchic," while Condorex presents "a distillation of masculinity – dynamic, ambitious, egotistic, ultimately unscrupulous" (Glendinning, *Rebecca* 134). Moreover, in West's own time, *Harriet Hume* was read by some as reinforcing not only gender stereotypes, but also a clear gender hierarchy. H. G. Wells, West's former lover and father of her son, thoroughly approved of the book and exchanged correspondences with Arnold Bennett in which he expressed a belief that *Harriet Hume* "unintentionally" proved his and Bennett's "shared belief in the essential 'secondariness' of women" (134).

While they may disagree with his initial premises, like Wells, late twentieth and early twenty-first-century feminist critics have continued to focus on the question

of what the ultimate balance of power is between genders at the end of this text. Jane Marcus has argued that the resolution of *Harriet Hume* – during which Harriet not only forgives Condorex for his numerous acts of cruelty but claims that her moral failure is as great as his because, while virtuous, as an artist she has failed to actively impress her ideals upon the real world – signals West’s evaluation of the failure of the suffragist cause to bring about real change to the position of women (Marcus, “Wilderness” 146). Francesca Frigerio, on the other hand, reads the novel’s final pages as delivering the triumph of Harriet, as after she and Condorex forgive each other, Harriet exercises her full power by literally commanding the orchestra of nature to bloom into a new spring. Frigerio argues that this final demonstration enacts West’s reversal of the association of the feminine and feminine art with powerlessness (Frigerio, “Music” 137).

These critics explore issues of the relationship between gender and power within West’s text by asking fundamental questions. What constitutes power, in West’s formulation? How is power distributed along gendered lines? What is the potential role of the artist (or the female artist) in the public sphere? While I too am interested in tracing currents of power in this text, my aim is to extend these primary questions. What does this text say about the very parameters that establish the grounds of this category of identity we call gender? What is the relation of art, tradition, and artists to these parameters? To the body and to identity in general? What are the possibilities for changing these parameters? *Harriet Hume* presents issues of aesthetics, the human process of formulating a sense of self, and

manifestations of social authority as connected issues. The crux of these connections lies in contemporary society's engagement with tradition.

*Harriet Hume* highlights the presence of tradition in the lives of everyday Londoners. Though not so densely packed with allusion as Eliot's "The Waste Land," today's common reader of *Harriet Hume* may wish for a similar endnote arrangement to explain the numerous references to works of culture, from ancient Greek sculpture to Renaissance painting, Victorian architecture, and even the occasional nod to West's contemporary writers. Indeed, I purposely mention Eliot because West's engagement with questions of the influence of tradition on contemporary culture rivals his, and in her writings on tradition he is clearly one of the forces she saw herself in conversation with. As Margaret D. Stetz has noted, West posited her own version of tradition against that of the "new humanists," a group of Anglo-American intellectuals whose circle included Irving Babbit, Paul Elmer More, and "to a lesser extent" Eliot, whom West saw as privileging tradition as a "conservative ideal" in comparison to a degraded present (Stetz, "Rebecca West's" 51).

Certainly, in her 1932 essay "What is Mr. T.S. Eliot's Authority as Critic?,"<sup>43</sup> West is highly critical of Eliot and the authority he claims over tradition in his own criticism. She provides examples where she sees Eliot as treating modern literature and art with a kind of flippancy and dismissive superiority. At one point she accuses him of gambling on "the Babbitt-More formula that the present day is inferior to the

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<sup>43</sup> Originally published in the September 30, 1932, edition of the *Daily Telegraph*, this article was a review of five different books, including a collection of Eliot's *Selected Essays* (1932) published by Faber & Faber, two critical works on Eliot, a volume of letters by D. H. Lawrence edited by Aldous Huxley, and Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* (1932). West, however, spends nearly the entirety of the article leveling sharp criticism against Eliot and his essays. A small section at the end focuses on Lawrence's letters and travel writings. The two critical works receive a few sentences review each, in which West asserts that Eliot is lucky that the scholars writing on him have better critical minds than he does.



seriousness of the past” (715). Furthermore, West challenges what she sees as Eliot’s assumption that the average Englishman neither recognizes nor respects tradition. She quotes Eliot’s famous passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Someone said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.’ Precisely, and they are that which we know” (qtd. West, “What” 716).

Identifying Eliot’s argument as a straw-man, West responds, “The retort is very neat, but who made the imbecile remark that provoked it? What lettered person in England imagines that it is not profitable to read dead writers and is unaware that many of these are superior to the living?” (716). West sees Eliot as privileging the past over the present and asserting the ignorance of the common man in order to bolster and solidify his own authority as critic. In West’s eyes, Eliot sets up a hierarchy in which the critic is superior. In an attempt to tear down this hierarchy, West relocates authority to everyday people, who encounter tradition in their everyday lives and who are part of the cultural community to whom this tradition belongs. She asserts the ability of the common man along with the modern artist to recognize, draw upon, and revitalize this tradition, which is ever present to them in their daily experiences and constitutes their cultural inheritance.<sup>44</sup>

Packed with references to art and culture, *Harriet Hume* participates in this debate by presenting West’s own version of tradition as a vital, omnipresent force within contemporary British society. Recent critical work on *Harriet Hume*

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<sup>44</sup> For the matter at hand, I am elaborating West’s view of Eliot as expressed in this essay because I think it provides insight to her presentation of tradition in both *Harriet Hume* and, as I will discuss shortly, *The Strange Necessity*. The question of how fair West is to Eliot in her evaluation of him is a topic worthy of further discussion. Certainly, it seems less than accurate to say that Eliot universally viewed the present as degraded in comparison to the past. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he asserts the role of modern art in renewing and reinventing tradition. However, West is perhaps justified in accusing Eliot of setting the critic apart and above the common man in claiming his ability to access and appreciate this tradition.

demonstrates quite convincingly that attention to representations of various artistic media, such as music, painting, and architecture, can give us insight into the nature of West's text;<sup>45</sup> however, the central role that storytelling plays, and particularly its development of West's stance on tradition, has yet to be explored. Both structurally and thematically, storytelling is at the very heart of this text. The novel traces the lives of its two main characters – the lovers Harriet Hume and Arnold Condorex – in an episodic fashion, presenting five meetings between them over the course of several decades. Each meeting features either the presentation of an oral storytelling performance by Harriet or a memory of a previous performance. These performances are a powerful means of connection between the work's two central characters. When Harriet wishes to entertain or communicate with Condorex, she does not, despite her obvious gifts as a nationally renowned pianist, play him a song. She tells him stories. Harriet's stories are most often what I call "explicit storytelling acts," that is they consciously signal themselves as oral storytelling performances. Condorex, in turn, is also a kind of storyteller, although his storytelling takes a very different form, consisting of private daydreams and personal fantasies that for the most part are narrated within Condorex's own mind, although they do occasionally surface to impose themselves upon the world through his actions, which have both wide-ranging political and personal ramifications. Closely intertwined with what Condorex repeatedly calls, with a nod to his political ambitions, his "talent for negotiation," Condorex often fails to recognize his stories as such and to see how they warp his view of himself and his motives.

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Francesca Frigerio's "Music and the Feminine Art of Detail in Rebecca West's *Harriet Hume*" (2006) and Debra Rae Cohen's "Sheepish Modernism: Rebecca West, the Adam Brothers, and the Taxonomies of Criticism" (2006).

Storytelling scenes in *Harriet Hume*, both explicit and less self-conscious, draw particular attention to the role that tradition plays in shaping how speaking and listening bodies interact within a modern context. They highlight issues of gender and power, and demonstrate connections between how these issues play out at a personal level and how they are reflected in Britain's international policies. Both Harriet's public storytelling performances and Condorex's private daydreams invoke and, at times, alter traditional storytelling patterns, particularly patterns associated with Western fairytales, myths, and occasionally historical narratives. Both draw connections between the numerous objects within West's text that serve as markers of tradition and the process through which individuals formulate their own subjectivity in relation to other beings. Thus the storytelling performances of *Harriet Hume* make particularly evident the relationship between tradition and traditional narrative patterns and life in early twentieth-century London.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the connections West draws between tradition, narrative, and the process of subject formation by first examining West's theory of the art and tradition as basic human needs as it is presented in *The Strange Necessity* (1928). In this complex work – part literary criticism, part philosophical treatise, part cultural critique – West presents subject formation as an essentially narrative process, a process of articulating past temporal events and building expectations for future ones through causal connections. This narrative process is grounded in and serves to help individuals understand their experiences of the everyday, physical world. These connections, and the narratives they create, are built upon and can only be understood within the context of a particular culture. Returning

to *Harriet Hume*, I then argue that the enactment of a certain paradigm of storytelling is central to the process through which Condorex establishes a sense of self in relation to others. I show how West's depiction of the storytelling habits of both Condorex and Harriet presents two different paradigms for narrating the self: one that is absolute, unselfconscious, and hierarchical and one that is shifting, performative, and relational. Ultimately, this chapter argues that West's depiction of storytelling in *Harriet Hume* highlights a complication of her own aesthetic, which regards tradition as, on the one hand, essential for human beings to understand their experiences in the world and connect with each other, and, on the other, potentially harmful and in need of revision. In *Harriet Hume*, Harriet's embodied, self-conscious storytelling performances make visible the tension between these two poles and attempt to resolve them.

### **Tradition and Storytelling as *Strange Necessity***

As West's earlier discussed critique of Eliot demonstrates, her view of tradition is one intimately tied to questions of cultural authority. Who has the authority to identify what constitutes tradition and to interpret its meaning? What specifically is at stake in designating who has this power? In order to fully understand how *Harriet Hume* engages these questions on a general level as well as specifically through its representations of story performances, one must regard this novel as in conversation with the prolonged discussion of tradition that West presented a year earlier in her critical work *The Strange Necessity* (1928). This book length essay presents a kind of theory of the role that tradition and narrative play in the process of

subject formation. In a move that foreshadows the development of late-twentieth-century schools of cultural studies and narrative theory, West argues that every culture has its own unique tradition that provides the essential schema through which individuals in that culture enact the continuous process of understanding individual experience and formulating a sense of self within the world.<sup>46</sup>

In *The Strange Necessity* West argues that art is essential to humanity because it is through the processes of artistic expression and appreciation that human beings have the ability to understand their experiences and communicate with each other. As West explains, “It can easily be understood why an artist creates works of art. There is no difficulty about that. I take it that from man’s earliest moments his most immediate necessity is to know what it [life] is about” (West, *Strange* 59).

Transmitted from generation to generation via “cellular memory,” West sees the impulse to create art as a genetic inheritance, an outgrowth of the basic instinct that enables human beings to navigate their environment (61).

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<sup>46</sup> Several other critics have also drawn close connections between *The Strange Necessity* and *Harriet Hume*. *Harriet Hume* was completed soon after West received the initial reviews of *The Strange Necessity*, which ranged from mixed to overwhelmingly negative. Noting that West believed that the “critical drubbing” she received at the hands of male writers and intellectuals was in part directly a result of her sex, Carl Rollyson argues that *Harriet Hume* was written as a further exploration of “the roots of sex-antagonism,” a project that West had begun in her unfinished work *Sunflower*, which she had abandoned writing earlier that year (Rollyson, *Literary* 66-67). Debra Rae Cohen not only sees *Harriet Hume* as a response to negative criticism of *The Strange Necessity*, and specifically male negative criticism, but also makes the further argument that *Harriet Hume* demonstrates West’s claim in *The Strange Necessity* that fiction can act as a scientific guide for understanding the behavior of people. In particular, Cohen sees West’s depiction of the relationship between Harriet Hume and Arnold Condorex as reenactment and critique of West’s own relation to and treatment by male critics of *The Strange Necessity* (Cohen, “Sheepish” 144). Certainly one cannot deny the role of sexual antagonism, both in West’s reception by critics and in *Harriet Hume*, but any argument aligning West’s persona with that of Harriet must acknowledge and account for the possible ways that West’s text can be seen as critical of Harriet as well as of Condorex, an issue which I address in the concluding section of this chapter. At this point, my own interests lay in the overlapping conversations that *The Strange Necessity* and *Harriet Hume* engage in concerning the relation between tradition as an authorizing and organizing schema, art as a construction through which this schema is deployed, and the particularly narrative process through which human beings establish a sense of self within, but separate from, the rest of the world.

As West describes it in *The Strange Necessity*, this basic instinct is rudimentarily narrative in nature. Echoing Freud,<sup>47</sup> who had outlined his theory of the internal conflict between the life instinct and the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) eight years earlier, West claims that every human being “is a battleground of two opposing forces: the will to live and the will to die” (59). From an early age, a human being learns to reconcile between these two forces and thus survives by developing sets of expectations based on the state of its external environment. West describes how this instinct manifests itself in a child just coming into consciousness of his existence:

His will to live suggests that he should take his milk like a man; his will to die suggests he should leave it. Wailing, he debates the matter with himself and with external forces. His mind takes elaborate notes of all such conflicts, on the behaviour of himself and of the eternal forces, on the decision arrived at, on their outcome; and presently he constructs a working hypothesis of life. He says to himself, “*This* appears to be the pattern of life. It will be safe to act as if this and that feature were going to recur in this and that order. (60)

Human beings learn to navigate their environment by believing themselves to have discerned patterns of cause and effect. These patterns, in turn, shape how human beings live and think of themselves in the world, as they fit their behaviors according to their expectations of how these patterns play out. While not a full-blown

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<sup>47</sup> West’s connection to Freud is a topic for further exploration. West was very much interested in Freud’s work, in which she found an explanation for her own complicated relationship with the memory of her father, although she did object that Freud’s theories did not adequately understand the female psyche. Shortly before the time she was writing *Harriet Hume*, West underwent psychoanalytic therapy (see Rollyson, *Rebecca* 161-163).

“narrative,” per se, this instinct – or this will to find a pattern, as we may call it – contains the basic narrative component of linking sequential events through a pattern of causal connection. The idea that, on some level, this pattern-making impulse is somewhat story-like in nature is reinforced by West’s further claim that the “hypothesis” that a child forms at an early age concerning the patterns of life “is so far from achieving an accurate version of life that it is fair to call it a fantasy” (60).

Art provides a set of “forms and patterns,” a framework through which individuals seek to establish a correspondence between these initial fantasies and their daily experience, what West calls “reality” or “an accurate version of life” (63; 60; 62). Artistic expression and, in turn, appreciation enables individuals to, as West repeatedly phrases it, “analyze and synthesize” their experiences in and perceptions within the world. Artists, however, do not establish this patterned framework of understanding *ex nihilo*; rather, in creating their art they draw upon the cultural tradition to which they belong and that they share with their intended audience. Thus we begin to see the chain of associations by which art, tradition, and the ability of the individual to develop a coherent and legitimate sense of self within the world are all intertwined. The fifth section of *Necessity* begins with what West presents as a guarded admission that, despite his long-windedness, Dostoevsky is quite right to express distrust for Russian intellectual *émigrés*, because “A man who goes out from his people cannot attain full growth” (140). Those who have been separated from their culture and tradition, by immigrating or, in the case of British civil servants and soldiers, by serving the empire abroad, lose the ability to “analyze and synthesize” their own experience, let alone communicate it to others. West supports her argument

by critiquing what she sees as the literary shortcomings of William Butler Yeats, a transplanted Protestant in Catholic Ireland, and Rudyard Kipling, a transplant of empire who chooses to view his own culture as an outsider (158).

This focus on tradition, on the necessity of drawing upon and maintaining one's connection with one's native culture as a means of attaining knowledge of the self and the ability to communicate this knowledge to others, leads West to produce what she sees as a different kind of storytelling figure than that of Conrad's Marlow. Marlow's insight into his own culture is at least partially a result of the time he has spent outside of it, journeying abroad to "the dark places of the earth" in order to recognize the darkness within his own civilization (Conrad, *Heart* 9). Indeed, West specifically names Conrad, along with Henry James, as an example of an *émigré* artist whose work demonstrates the need to compensate for the author's disconnect from his home tradition. She arguably makes at least a superficial reference to Conrad's Marlow and other traveling tale-tellers in her critical description of "the unending garrulity of explorers and big-game hunters and old soldiers, about whose 'yarn-spinning round the fire over a pipe' there is a neurotic and unsatisfied quality" (188). Deflating what she sees as hypermasculinized tales of male exploits and glory, West draws an unfavorable comparison, finding that they have the same air as "the tedious anecdotes that women of many loves tell in the autumn of their days, that Proust made Odette de Crécy gabble in her old age" (West, *Strange* 188). West sees these men who have chosen to live abroad or as expatriates in the colonies as having severed their connection with their own culture and tradition. Their kind of gabbling



fails to produce self-understanding of their own experience, let alone communicate this experience and create any sort of community.

West's formulation here of the expatriate or exile writer is problematic on several levels, not the least of which is the scent of a kind of emphasis on national or racial purity. Moreover, her assertions concerning "exile" writers such as Henry James are not consistent with her writings elsewhere. Her book length study *Henry James* (1916) does focus on James' nationality of birth, stating, "he was an American; and that meant, for his type and generation, that he could never feel at home until he was in exile" (West, *Henry* 9). Yet she also sees James' transplantation to Europe as central to the development of his genius. Furthermore, West's central storytelling figures in *Harriet Hume* are themselves both insiders and outsiders to tradition and society. As we shall discuss, Harriet's position as a woman makes her a central object within a tradition that has a clearly mapped notion of the feminine. She is included as an object but excluded as an agent. One might think of her as a member of Woolf's "Outsider's Society" described in *Three Guineas*. While Condorex's gender makes him a kind of insider, throughout the novel, he constantly feels excluded from the upper echelon of society to which he aspires, defined by their old money and family lineage, because of his humble, lower-class origins. The point that I am making here is that the insider/outside divide when it comes to tradition may not be as clearly delineated as West lays it out in *The Strange Necessity*, even while it seems to be central to West's notion of art and culture.

For all the emphasis that West puts upon the importance of maintaining a strong connection with tradition, her position regarding tradition demonstrates a

degree of ambivalence that prevents her from falling into the kind of stagnant worship of the past that she associates with Eliot and accommodates her own political progressivism. Even as she argues that tradition shapes human consciousness and the necessity of tradition for this purpose, West simultaneously concedes that tradition can be limiting as well. In *Harriet Hume*, West continues this exploration of the role of tradition in shaping human consciousness within a specifically British context, setting her tale in London, the political and cultural capital of the British nation. Indeed, given the connotation of the term “fantasy” set by West in *The Strange Necessity*, one could easily read the full title of West’s novel, *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy*, as indicating the novel’s engagement with and exploration of the intersecting patterns of history, culture, and tradition that shape both individual and national consciousness.

### **Plotting Opposites, Re-Plotting Difference: Two Paradigms for Narrating the Self**

*Harriet Hume* highlights the role that storytelling plays in the process of subject formation – the continuous process by which human beings come to have a sense of self existing within the world, simultaneously connected to but also as different and separate from other individuals and things. Both Harriet and Condorex are, in their own fashion, storytellers who use cultural narratives as a means by which they understand their daily experience, articulate their desires, and conceptualize their relation to others. Harriet herself recognizes this similarity between herself and Condorex when she first realizes her ability to read his mind. Having been privy to Condorex’s “day-dream” of meeting a beautiful northern woman alone in her cottage,

who finds him irresistibly handsome, Harriet identifies with his romantic imaginings of the self-as-desired (30). As she tells him, “Dearest, I was so glad when you thought that, for it showed me how like you are to me! For never, I will now confess to you, have I travelled on the Underground without expecting the ticket-collector to throw aside that pert snapping metal thing, and pop down on his knees, disclosing himself to be the Prince of Wales who (I admit very oddly) has chosen to find his bride by acting in that capacity, having had from childhood an ambition to marry that woman of the realm who has the smallest hand and the most darned gloves” (30).

Both these stories run according to recognizable narrative patterns.

Condorex’s day-dream places him in the role of heroic savior to the beautiful, lonely woman who has been isolated or abandoned, an answer to the longings of the domestically-imprisoned female. This latter figure is of course itself a pervasive archetype within Western culture, from fairytales of Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel to Tennyson’s Mariana and Lady of Shalott.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Harriet’s fantasy contains recognizable fairytale patterns – the tropes of disguised or misrecognized royalty and of finding a woman of a particular hand or shoe size. Unlike Condorex, however, Harriet re-plots these fairytales in her own modern, urban context, with the prince disguising himself as a ticket-collector. Moreover, although Harriet’s story clearly repeats the pattern of a female who is rescued from her poverty and solitariness by a more powerful male, her heroine freely ranges the city on the Underground rather than waiting for her savior in an enclosed home or castle. This kind of playful re-plotting, along with Harriet’s further comment that the similarity of their inclination

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<sup>48</sup> According to Carl Rollyson, when they were children West’s older sister Winnie commonly comforted her by reciting “The Lady of Shalott” (Rollyson, *Rebecca* 23).

to day-dream makes them “silly children” who may now “play together without fear of being scorned,” is indicative of fundamental differences between how Harriet and Condorex approach and enact their storytelling and, in turn, their sense of being a self within the world and in relation to others (30-31).

Harriet and Condorex are, after all, as the text repeatedly emphasizes, “opposites.” Yet while the text itself appears adamantly clear on this point – even Harriet, who thrives on finding connections, must admit when pushed, “Ay, we are opposites” – it is less immediately apparent what being “opposites” concretely means (203). Most often, critics discuss Harriet and Condorex as “opposites” according to their gender or gendered binaries – female vs. male, passive vs. active, private sphere vs. public sphere – or they note Harriet and Condorex’s “opposed” positions as artist and politician.<sup>49</sup> Yet, on the most basic level, Harriet and Condorex are “opposites” in the way that they conceive of the very concept of “oppositeness” – in the way that they schematize, and ultimately narrativize, their own subjectivity and the relationship between self and other. Condorex sees “opposites” as fundamentally and aggressively at odds. As he explains to Harriet, “my love, there is no room in the world of spirits for opposites... Believe me it has room for only one will” (204).

Condorex cannot accept that “opposites” can co-exist in the “spiritual world” because

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<sup>49</sup> For some earlier works that posit opposition between Harriet and Condorex based on gender and field of employment, see Glendinning’s “Introduction” to the 1980 Virago Modern Classic edition of *Harriet Hume* and Marcus’ article “Wilderness of One’s Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties.” In *Refiguring Modernism*, Scott continues to pose Harriet and Condorex’s opposition in terms of gender, but challenges certain associated binaries on the grounds that as an artist Harriet is an active participant in and shaper of public life (B. Scott, *Refiguring 2*: 141-142). Cohen has recently proposed that as “opposites” Harriet and Condorex represent West’s own formulation of the juxtaposition between herself and male critics of *The Strange Necessity*. Cohen argues that Harriet and Condorex represent two contrary approaches to culture, one that traces connections between disparate intellectual fields (literature, painting, science, etc.) and a “masculine critical taxonomy” that insists all fields must remain separate in their “inviolable categories” (Cohen 145, 144). While I am hesitant to equate Harriet and Condorex completely with West and her critics, because such parallels limit possibilities for textual interpretation, Cohen’s differentiation between Harriet and Condorex in terms of how they approach the idea of categorization, or difference, holds much in common with my argument here. My approach, however, broadens the application of this idea to the formation of subjectivity via culture.

he believes one “opposite” must always dominate the other, either by destroying this other or by making it fit into the more powerful side’s paradigm or worldview, which, for Condorex, are ultimately the same move. As he concedes to Harriet, after she refuses to “compromise” with his “principle of negotiation”: “Well, you are right. To concede to one’s opposite, in the most infinitesimal degree, is to die” (204-205). Condorex’s conviction that he must finally kill Harriet, a resolution that he comes to during his confused and eventually desperate ghost-walk across London in the final chapter, seems to be the outcome of such a perspective on the relationship between “opposites.”

However, while opposites, in Condorex’s formulation, must seek to destroy each other, they create each other as well. Attempting to find a logic behind Harriet’s ability to read his mind, a slightly delirious Condorex concludes at one point that her skill directly results from their position as opposites. As he muses, “No wonder she can read my thoughts! There is no need to suppose magic there. She need but look in her own mind, record what she sees, imagine its opposite, and she has all of me” (213). This formulation of opposites has much in common with the way Condorex presents the relation between self and other in the stories he tells, both to himself during his day-dreams and self-“negotiations” and to the public during his speeches. This relation, in turn, proves to be crucial to the process of subject formation that Condorex performs through his storytelling. Separated by clearly defined borders, pitted against each other in a relationship where one party is clearly established as the dominant power, Condorex’s concepts of self and other are connected in a circuit of

mutual creation – for it is by concretely imagining the other within set categories of social identity that Condorex ultimately reifies his own sense of a stable subjectivity.

The example of Condorex’s daydream with which we opened this section demonstrates this process as it takes place. Marcus argues that this fantasy presents “a typical male rape fantasy,” in which Condorex imagines an act of sexual conquest as “rescuing a lonely woman from an unhappy sex life” (Marcus, “Wilderness” 138).

While categorizing Condorex’s daydream as an imagined rape seems extreme to me, I do agree that this daydream clearly has at its core the projection of a self in a position of power, specifically in comparison to and over another individual in need. This daydream takes place after Condorex discovers a picture of what he assumes must be Harriet’s mother in Harriet’s living room. Curious about the place and people Harriet might have come from, Condorex looks at the picture of this “very handsome” woman and ponders what she might be like. He wonders, “What a life she must have all her days, shut up in that hole at the world’s end with the man whose photograph was on the right, a bearded creature pretentiously austere, overblown with patriarchy, as avid for opportunities to raise a hand to heaven and bless or curse his children as a prima donna for arias” (19). Having imagined this beautiful woman as a downtrodden wife, married to a domineering husband, Condorex then, as mentioned above, casts himself as a lost traveler coming as a kind of savior to the home of this woman. Yet, interestingly, as Condorex narrates this story, he focuses not on the woman’s beauty, but on his own appearance as seen by her. As the narrator describes his fantasy:

He heard through her imagined ears his knock on an imagined door;  
and could see with her imagined eyes his obscured handsomeness

standing beyond the threshold in the night...In an imagined kitchen he stood and quietly waited till she finished her task of putting the chain back on the door, and turned, and saw him; and bade him sit down, and when he was seated ingenuously moved the lamp along the table nearer him, till his handsomeness was wholly within its bright circle. One would not move until she sighed. (19)

In this daydream, Condorex's imagines a coherent (and attractive) vision of the self, both as a physically handsome being and as embodiment of a particularly romantic and heroic version of masculine power. However, this coherent vision of the self is possible only via the mediation of an imagined other.

Condorex's subsequent action of immediately moving to admire his reflection in the mirror above Harriet's mantelpiece is merely a continuation of this storytelling self-projection. Admiring his appearance, Condorex engages in a kind of reading of the male body that situates his self-image (by which I mean both the visual image of what Condorex sees in the mirror and Condorex's own sense of himself as an individual identity) within cultural narratives of history, class, and politics. He muses to himself that his "raven hair" that lies over his ears like "Disraeli's locks" make him look as though, with the addition of a neck cloth, "he might have been any of the statesmen who were great when Corn Laws and Reform Bills were all the go" (20).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The comparison Condorex is drawing here is clearly between himself and Benjamin Disraeli, the highly influential conservative politician who was prime minister briefly in 1868 and from 1874-1880. The fact that Condorex draws a comparison between himself and Disraeli is particularly revealing. Obviously, both men are conservative politicians. More than that, however, just as Condorex often feels himself to be a kind of outsider among his fellow politicians because he has neither wealth nor an illustrious family name, Disraeli began his political career as an outsider as well because of his Jewish heritage. Disraeli was initially overlooked for political promotion by the conservative government while Sir Robert Peel was prime minister. Disraeli's opposition to the repeal of the Corn Laws, a policy change proposed by Peel's conservative government, was part of a schism within the Conservative Party that contributed to Peel's downfall and solidified Disraeli as the new leader of the party. The Reform Bills were a series of acts aimed at extending the right to vote which were debated over the

Noting the shape of his features and body, he decides that “He had the right aquilinity of head which was preserved from suspicion of above-earthness by the square shoulders, themselves preserved from the contrary suspicion of peasant grossness by the lean waist, the temperate hips” (20). Examining his face, Condorex is pleased to find, “he had to a T that ample, marbly Romanness of profile which would make them [the People] think he had written his speech in the library of his place, beneath the cold eyes of the third earl, a bust, and Cicero, a remarkably fine tern” (20). Condorex reads his own physiognomy through narratives of history and tradition.

Many of the daydreams Condorex muses to himself throughout West’s text consist of recognizable story-patterns through which he projects a coherent sense of his own identity, often in relation to an other. Arriving at the home of an old army general, Condorex notices that the general’s daughter blushes when she sees him, and imagines that she blushes because he is the first human being in years to take note of her existence from outside the walls of the home she shares with her father. Again, Condorex positions himself as a potential male savior to a woman trapped in a domestic space; yet unlike his previous daydream, he casts this isolated female in a tragic-romance. He imagines that his appearance has coincided with fatal decision: “he knew she had this very day formed a dreadful resolution that if nothing happened in the next thirty years she would dress herself all in white and fling herself from the Italiante tower which gave a romantic finish to the villa” (70). The final clause of this description of Condorex’s daydream – “which gave a romantic finish to the villa” – cuts two ways. From one perspective, the Italiante tower is clearly the referent that

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course of Disraeli’s career (“Benjamin”). Condorex dreams of following a similar trajectory from outsider to leader within the conservative party.



provides this “romantic finish,” yet from another perspective, one could argue that in Condorex’s formulation it is also the daughter’s imagined act of suicide (another kind of “romantic finish”), or even her imagined promise to commit such an act, that makes the villa, and Condorex himself, romantic in Condorex’s eyes (70).

While Condorex’s private daydreams illustrate the role that an “opposite,” imagined along traditional tropes of gender, plays in establishing his sense of personal identity, his most prominent act of public storytelling demonstrates how the formation of national consciousness can follow a similar process. Condorex’s rise to political prominence is precipitated by his fortuitous discovery of a mistake in the Mangostan Treaty, a document that establishes the borders of Britain’s Indian colony. This document makes reference to a city called Mondh, which, much to the annoyance of colonial administrators, no one can find on a map. Having been sent by his superiors to interview a decrepit general, supposedly the one individual known to the British government who can verify the existence and location of Mondh, Condorex realizes that the old man has confused Mondh with another Indian city, Pondh – a city that is of no use to the British authorities since it is not mentioned in the Mangostan treaty. Faced with this moral dilemma, Condorex considers his line of action in terms of both his own welfare and that of the British nation: “Would he advance himself if he returned with this information? Would he, indeed, be advancing the cause of the British Empire, of civilization, of peace, were he so almost rudely honest?” (71). Reaching the decision to, he announces, “Let Pondh be Mondh” (71). Condorex, in effect, creates a fiction of empire. Not only does he report back to

his superiors a false verification that Mondh exists, but he also goes on to deliver his seminal speech on the Fortress of Mondh that launches his political career.

This speech, which is based upon a fiction, becomes so popular that it is a required text for school children to recite on Empire Day. Condorex's conscious act of creating an Indian city, both for the sake of his own advancement and the British empire, draws attention to the way that West depicts the imperial mindset as both engaged in and dependent on its own kind of mythmaking. Noting that the most efficient way to determine the location of a city in India would be to ask a native inhabitant of that area, the narrator dismisses this option because:

For the sake of the British Raj no white man must ever admit to a Mango that he does not know everything. Once the secret were to leak out, the insolence of the Mangoes at present studying law and mathematics in this country would become unbridled, and there would not be a rupee or a virgin left between Middle Temple Hall and Cambridge; and from Mangostan disloyal expeditions would start off for Moscow, which certainly would not be able to do anything with them, but ought not to be encouraged even by that much. (69)

Although the overall tone of this quote could be termed as facetious, one can also see the narrator as being engaged in kind of layered performance of voice, which might be understood in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of a "hybrid construction," that is an utterance belonging to a single source or speaker that mixes two or more types of speech (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 304). This passage deploys both the rhetoric of imperialism ("there would not be a rupee or a virgin between Middle Temple Hall

and Cambridge”) and undercuts the idea of racial superiority upon which imperialism is based (“no white man must ever admit to a Mango that he does not know everything”). By doing so, the narrator reveals the degree to which idea of British superiority is a construction, based upon both maintaining a particular perception of the colonial other as well as the perception that the colonial other regards the British white man in a particular way. As the later actions of Prince Camaralzaman of Mangostan clearly show, the notion that the colonial subject is unaware of the shortcomings of his or her imperial oppressors is wishful thinking. It is Camaralzaman, after all, who realizes the Pondh-Mondh cover-up and uses this knowledge to manipulate and humiliate Condorex and his party by leaking to a Russian newspaper a rumor that the city of Mondh has been seized by rebels. In the end, the imaginary city created to reify empire’s agenda and self-image reveals the very kind of weakness it was created to hide. Although a fictional specter, Mondh has very real effects upon the physical state of the empire, as the equally fictitious news of its downfall sends the British public into a panic. Moreover, when faced with this dilemma, Condorex and his fellow politicians choose to multiply specters rather than exorcise the original, as their solution is to publish an account of the fictional re-taking of Mondh by its native citizens, who are loyal to the British crown.

This dependence on a projection of an other as part of the process of establishing a sense of self explains why Condorex’s own identity is threatened whenever he sees people or things step out of the categories he has established. The revelation of Condorex’s Mondh-Pondh cover-up exposes Condorex as a fraud to his own political party, and while they participate in the public avoidance of a larger

scandal, his credibility is destroyed. As the city and speech that were the foundation of his career are exposed as figments, so too is his public persona. Condorex's identity is threatened at its core. The final chapter of the novel opens with Condorex again looking intently at his reflection in the mirror, for now when he is alone "a feeling came upon him that there was nobody in the room, not even himself" (218). As Condorex's fictional city and the public persona he built upon it crumble, so does Condorex's sense of being a coherent self within the world. When the newspapers report the "Fall of Mondh," referring to the city, Condorex feels that the papers, unbeknownst to the masses, are actually reporting his own fall (218). As the chapter progresses and Condorex stumbles out onto the streets of London, the basic divisions Condorex has always depended on to navigate his way through the physical world continue to disappear. He cannot tell the season, nor get a sense of his direction on the grid of the city. Indeed, he even begins to lose a sense of the hierarchal stability of his "oppositeness" to Harriet. As he raves, "Ay, there has been abolished order. That is shown by the destruction of that division between human beings, which confined one to little fiddling activities which are but one disguise worn by obscurity, and exalting another of more grandiose to make appropriate grandeur; for I, even I, am threatened with obscurity" (253). Condorex recognizes himself as a trifler, a creator of fancies like Harriet. Unmoored from the categories and hierarchies of difference that he believed so rigid, Condorex's sense of self dissolves.

Harriet, on the other hand, formulates the relationship between "opposites" differently. In response to Condorex's prompting that she admit they are "opposites," Harriet responds, "Ay, we are opposites...But surely that is no great harm. There is

the North, and there is the South, and there is no war between them” (203). Harriet’s choice of these terms to illustrate her view of “oppositeness” is telling. On the one hand, since North and South in this quote are capitalized and preceded by the article “the,” one could easily think Harriet is referring to specific places. We learn early in the text that Harriet is originally from the northern part of the United Kingdom. However, at the same time, north and south are also abstract concepts. As such, they are, fundamentally opposite, but this opposition is rooted in sameness. They are both directions, cardinal points on opposite sides of a compass. Moreover, north and south possess no inherent physical characteristics unless applied to a particular topography. They are opposites, but their physical location and characteristics shift depending on landscape or point-of-view. Their opposition, their very existence, is based on relation, rather than boundary or division. As abstract concepts, it is impossible to consider the relationship between north and south as hierarchical, or that one of these two “opposites” could consume the other. Thus, Harriet sees the relationship between “opposites” as shifting and relational, and their opposition is based on a fundamental connection. The difference between them is constant, and yet what constitutes each must be re-plotted as the physical terrain changes.

This sense of the relationship that exists between self and other both shapes and is reflected by Harriet’s storytelling habits and the different notion of subjectivity that they produce. While Condorex’s stories produce a sense of identity by reifying an idea of difference, or opposition, that is hierarchical and absolute, Harriet’s stories unfold an understanding of the variety of ways that difference can be plotted within the British tradition. These stories generate a sense of self as shifting and self-

consciously performative. In comparison, one might say that one of Condorex's most egregious faults, as presented by West's text, is not just the kind of stories he tells, per se, but rather his failure to recognize them as stories, to comprehend and acknowledge his true motives, which they often hide, and to see the ways that his sense of being in the world is constructed by and out of culture. Condorex refers to his inclination to justify his past actions or future plans by emplotting them according to specific cultural narratives of masculine superiority or national pride as "a talent for negotiation" that he exercises equally well with himself as with other people (72). Harriet, on the other hand, is comfortable with the categorization of her stories as "fairy-tales." As noted earlier, she regards her daydreams as a form of "play" (31). The roles to be assumed, and the qualities that accompany them, are malleable and fleeting. Yet while Harriet may concede that her stories are fancy, she also argues for their ability to reveal truth and affect the physical world. Indeed, each of Harriet's major storytelling "scenes" – the performances through which she communicates the explicit stories of the Dudley sisters, the ghosts of the Adam brothers, and the Hour of Animation – presents and enacts an argument for the potential of art, as consciously crafted fancy, to transform the modern world.

Before looking more closely at these performances, however, I want to explore a little more thoroughly the connection between Harriet's approach to storytelling and her understanding of identity, particularly as they are made evident and enacted through her story performances. As an artist figure, West presents Harriet as not just a producer but as an acute reader and interpreter of culture. As such, Harriet intuitively understands the ways that culture, tradition, and the narratives they

produce are intimately tied to the human impulse and ability to differentiate and define the self. The short vignette Harriet shares with Condorex about the sad Italian Garden demonstrates this understanding by highlighting the role that cultural narratives of gender and nation play in solidifying identity. Harriet explains to Condorex that she often walks in the Italian Garden section of Kensington Gardens “out of kindness,” spinning a kind of short character sketch that anthropomorphizes this location (86). She tells him that the Italian Garden in Kensington Gardens is sad because, like all Italian gardens displaced onto English soil, its reality fails to fulfill the romantic vision it has of itself. Visited daily by dogs and fat children with their nursemaids, the Italian Garden longs to be the scene of an operatic duel between two men vying for the same woman. Harriet then compares the disappointment of the Italian garden to the position of English women of Italian descent, who relate that their grandmother was Italian while “hungrily” turning an expectant eye to the door in anticipation of a tall and fair lover. Thus in Harriet’s vignette, the Italian garden formulates a sense of identity and an expectation for the meaning and purpose of its existence based upon a “fantasy,” to use West’s term from *The Strange Necessity*, formed out of narratives of nationality and gender as they are presented in the tradition of Italian opera, and this fanciful presentation of the garden has clear connections and implications for how human beings create a sense of identity as well.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> In point of fact, Harriet’s storytelling habit of anthropomorphizing objects often illustrates her understanding of how the human mind works. After reading in an article in *The Times* that a “Parsee gentleman” had discovered that plants too possess consciousness, Harriet theorizes that formerly organic or inorganic objects like “sticks, and stones, and metal” may as well (West, *Harriet* 124). Hence, Condorex finds Harriet hanging cherries on a railing so that she could “admit one area-rail with to the high human pleasure of feeling finer than its neighbors” (124).

What does this tell us about Harriet's own sense of subjectivity? What is the relation between her storytelling and identity? Our ability to answer these questions is inexorably tied to how we, as readers, have access to Harriet's storytelling acts. The majority of Condorex's stories take place within the 'privacy' of his own head and are presented to the reader via free indirect discourse. (The word 'privacy' appears in quotes here since, given Harriet's ability to read Condorex's mind, his thoughts are not always private.) Harriet's stories, on the other hand, are consistently presented as public performances. Even the episodes in which she may share a daydream, such as her fantasy of the prince as ticket collector, are narrated by Harriet to Condorex. Harriet's description of her own role in relation to the Italian Garden is thus characteristic of her self-presentation, as well as her formulation of self, throughout West's text. For having narrated the above description of the Italian Garden, Harriet then tells Condorex that she makes "a point of coming here every now and then and walking up and down as if I had lost my lover" in order to cheer it (87). Granted that Harriet soon admits that she has been talking "nonsense," Harriet's description of herself still demonstrates an understanding of how identity is connected to performances that occur within the context of particular cultural narratives. To say that Harriet understands identity as performative is not a denial of subjectivity, but a recognition that any coherent vision we come to articulate as self is a construct of culture and tradition.<sup>52</sup> Culture and tradition are invoked through consciously and unconsciously performed acts, including acts of interpretation. With this recognition

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<sup>52</sup> Thus, we might say, that West's presentation of Harriet in some ways anticipates Judith Butler's arguments concerning the performative nature of gender-identity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). West's notion of "oppositeness," however, seems to provide a notion of essential difference incompatible with Butler's conclusions. These apparent parallels could be a fruitful ground for further exploration.



comes a degree of agency, not to completely self-create, but to exercise a certain conscious choice of shifting among roles and of refusing to establish a set definition of self according to the terms Condorex's absolute and hierarchal paradigm.

In the next section, I examine more thoroughly the ways that West portrays Harriet as exercising agency and power through her embodied storytelling performances. West highlights Harriet's storytelling body as a layered and contradictory space. She emphasizes the materiality of Harriet as a physical body that is the source of story production, present to the listener as an object that can be seen, heard, and touched; yet at the same time, Harriet's body also comes to her audience (i.e. Condorex) and, in turn, to the reader, as a coded object, ultimately perceived and categorized according to historically conditioned cultural scripts. Harriet's awareness of these scripts, granted by her artistic temperament and her ability to read Condorex's mind, coupled with her performative storytelling skills enable her to embrace a kind of spectral agency, as she consciously shifts between performances, embracing contradiction and demonstrating how tradition itself is variable, flexible, and re-plottable within the modern world.

### **Contradiction, Repetition, and Performance: West's Specter of the Female Storyteller**

While Walter Benjamin's vision of the pre-modern storyteller takes its shape from a nostalgic longing for what is not present, the desire that circumscribes Harriet is markedly more carnal. Benjamin's storyteller may have an occupation, as a traveler or artisan; he may represent a time when experience could be communicated "from mouth to mouth;" he may even incorporate into his stories the *imago* of his mother –

but the storyteller himself is faceless (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 84). As what Michael Greaney terms a "composite figure," Benjamin's spectral storyteller is at once a figure of the idealized past and the potential future (Greaney 16). We have a sense of this storyteller as a general idea, an idea connected to an ethical standard of storytelling that we yearn to return to, perhaps for the first time, but not as a specific body. Harriet, on the other hand, is most certainly a palpable and distinct storytelling body to be desired and touched.

West emphasizes Harriet's material presence through repeated attention to the physical details of her being – the smallness of her hands, her waist, her feet – and occasional but well placed incidents focusing on touch, such as the kiss that brings Condorex back from his "private darkness," as he feels "in the center of his large mouth, her little mouth alighting like a butterfly" (West, *Harriet* 149). In an early scene, West highlights Harriet's body as a source of sound when she evokes a response from her piano by reciting poetry. Explaining how she uses the "cords" of her throat to produce vibrations that effect the "chords" of the piano, Harriet not only, as Frigerio claims, organicizes the mechanical instrument of the piano, but she also brings into focus the bodily mechanics that produce speech performance (Frigerio, "Music" 134-135). Even one of the most internal and cognitive of activities, reading, is externalized and made performative when engaged in by Harriet. Her poor eyesight makes it necessary for her to spread the newspapers she reads across the floor and lean over them on her hands and knees, moving her head as she scans each line. This image emphasizes reading as an embodied act. Harriet's oral storytelling is similar in nature, as her performances constantly draw attention to her body's materiality.

Throughout the text, Harriet often tells her stories while wrapped in Condorex's arms, and the interaction of their bodies typically directs storytelling scenes. For example, during a pause in her story of the Dudley sisters, Condorex tugs on her arm "as if he were a child and she his nurse" to prompt her to continue telling her first story (West, *Harriet* 42). These kinds of incidents highlight how oral storytelling forms connections based, in part, upon the presence of physical bodies.

Yet, while we have a sense of Harriet as a physical being, there remains something ghostly or unworldly about this female storyteller as well. Nestled within Kensington, a neighborhood described more than once as "a cracked tombstone with a lilac bush bursting from it," Harriet's residence at Blennerhassett House feels far removed from the everyday (89). Like the wilderness Harriet invokes when reciting Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun," Harriet's garden is presented as a idyllic green-space, a fitting setting for the tale of the Dudley sisters that Harriet shares there. This aura of otherworldliness extends to Harriet's apartment as well, as indeed the actual border between inside and outside of Harriet's apartment is rather unsettled and unsettling. Lacking a front door, one must enter Harriet's house by climbing a set of stairs to a terrace window that gives the visitor immediate, and often, for the first time visitor, unexpected, access to the apartment. Referred to by Condorex as "one of one's own quiet haunts," Harriet's residence is the setting for such extraordinary events as Harriet demonstrating how she can command a piano to play using only her voice and the discovery of Harriet's ability to read Condorex's mind. Harriet herself is a fitting occupant for this space. As Condorex admiringly describes her to himself: "Of all the women he had ever

known she was the most ethereal. Loving her was like swathing oneself with a long scarf of spirit” (11). However, he also immediately follows this idea with a contradiction: “Yet, so far as loving went, how human!”(11).

This presentation of Harriet as at once both corporeal and otherworldly moves in several directions. To begin, it can be seen as part of a larger pattern repeated throughout the text where Harriet’s body is consistently described as a site of contradiction. In a way, she literally embodies the kind of co-existence of opposites that Condorex refuses to accept as possible. Thus Condorex is aware when he sees Harriet after several years that her fingers “would feel as no other woman’s fingers do, having the texture of coolness and the temperature of warmth” (182). Descriptions of Harriet throughout West’s text categorize her as both ethereal and earthy, as a delicately constructed work of art and a naturally agile animal, as a figure of timelessness and an object of time-bound desires, as an ancient emblem of femininity and a modern New Woman. Often Condorex or the narrator, whose focalizes almost exclusively through Condorex’s perspective, notes how Harriet displays these contradictory qualities simultaneously.

This issue of focalization, and the degree to Condorex’s perception of Harriet mediates our own, brings to light another way that West’s female storyteller becomes spectral. Each of the various descriptions of Harriet given in the novel – as a sensual cat, as a water nymph, as a rose, as a dove, as a witch, as a sibyl, as a sculpture personifying mercy, or as a specific character like Cassandra or Eurydice – is rooted in cultural mythologies of womanhood. With each repetition, West reveals Harriet as a figure both familiar and strange – a figure that is of the present and out-of-time.

The so-called “essence of femininity” (Glenn dining), Harriet becomes a kind of specter, an uncanny repetition both invoking and invoked by the various images of the female that recall her. The nymph statues in Kensington Gardens, the stone etching of Eurydice, even the “shadow woman” cast by lights in Condorex’s study resembling the reclining figure of Madame Récamier from Jacques-Louis David’s portrait<sup>53</sup> – all invoke Harriet’s presence to Condorex (West, *Harriet* 171, 172, 175). The last of these in particular haunts Condorex as a reminder of Harriet’s disapproving knowledge of his political misdeeds. He even calls the shadowy figure a “ghost” and imagines it “eavesdropping” on his thoughts in the same manner as Harriet (177).

This kind of repetition illustrates and enacts the ways the idea of “woman” has been represented within the Western tradition. Ultimately, Harriet’s own understanding of her relation to these representations allows her to manipulate them through her storytelling performances. Both Frigerio and Scott have noted instances in which Harriet can be seen as contributing to Condorex’s impulse to classify her according to these kinds of images. Frigerio points out, for example, how Harriet encourages Condorex to think of her as a “pastoral nymph” or “bucolic princess” by reciting Marvell’s poem, which is itself narrated by a nymph, and describing herself as like a china shepherdess (Frigerio, “Music” 127-128). Similarly, Scott calls Harriet “a performer of the feminine” and notes how she encourages Condorex to think of her as “delicate and yielding” by appearing to bend herself to his will (B. Scott,

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<sup>53</sup> Jeanne-Françoise Julie Adélaïde Bernard Récamier (1777-1849) was a famous French beauty known for her wit and hospitality. She ran a salon in Paris just before the turn of the eighteenth-century that hosted famous artists and political figures. David’s portrait of her, which was begun in 1800 but not finished, features a virginal looking Récamier lounging on a long couch. Her hair and dress invoke a neoclassical style of dress that fits the Condorex’s consistent characterization of Harriet as having a Grecian air about her.

*Refiguring 2*: 142). I want to both support Frigerio and Scott's idea that these acts are conscious performances and take this idea a step further by drawing attention to the fact that even as she performs these acts, Harriet possesses a kind of double-awareness of self and of self-as-other that comes from her ability to read Condorex's mind. Harriet uses this double-awareness to her advantage. She is able to see and respond to Condorex's thoughts. Using Condorex's own presuppositions concerning gender and the cultural scripts upon which they are based, she consciously performs in order to manipulate how he perceives her.

This double-awareness is a source of power that Harriet uses to her advantage, even as she attempts to help Condorex achieve a level of self-understanding by confronting him with the true nature and inevitable results of his political intrigues. During one of the brief moments of revelation when Condorex allows himself to remember that Harriet has the ability to read his mind – his talent for “negotiation” enables him to repeatedly forget such an inconvenient and unpleasant fact – he experiences fear and feelings of powerlessness the narrator describes as a kind of reversal of the “male gaze,”<sup>54</sup> stemming from Condorex's awareness of being the object of Harriet's scrutiny. Displeased that Harriet has come to his home late one evening, Condorex consoles himself by noting the perfection of her body as well as the feelings of power it gives him to see and appreciate her. As the narrator describes, “...mercifully her cloak had slipped from her shoulders and exposed her form closely

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<sup>54</sup> My use of this term here is based in Laura Mulvey's notion of the “male gaze” in film, a concept she elucidates in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Building on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey argues that within traditional film the act of viewing is subject to a gender imbalance, where men are the active viewers and women are passive objects that are viewed, objects that serve to incite erotic pleasure as well as to allow the viewer to solidify a coherent sense of self. The audience is invited to inhabit this perspective as well. While Mulvey's focus is film, she sees this phenomenon as present in and potentially stemming from other visual spectacles like pin-ups (Mulvey 19). According to Mulvey, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (20). In other words, he cannot bear to be the object of such a gaze. Such a framing seems to resonate with Condorex's feelings here.

moulded in a white gown of a Greek fashion. He was therefore able to enjoy that sense of being at an advantage which he always derived from admiring a woman's beauty in detail" (183). Yet in the next moment, he remembers Harriet's gift, and "it struck him that she was as still as though she sat for her picture, and his heart cried out, 'She knows what I am thinking! She is letting the poor fool find what solace he can in the ridiculous position of being an open book which another can read at will!'" (183).

This reversal of the male gaze also presents an interesting twist on the trope of the woman's body as a blank page, to be written on and read according to patriarchal whims. Certainly the narrator invokes such a trope through its repeated assertions that Harriet wears a "parchment-coloured" dress, as well as comments that equate Harriet's body with a writing surface ("Decidedly she was not looking her best, for heat and weariness had printed shadows under her eyes and round her mouth, which lay on her fine skin like watermarks on paper") (74, 121, 125). Yet this inscribability of Harriet's person is ultimately a strength that allows her agency over her self-presentation.

### **Re-Plotting Tradition: Art and the Power of Specters**

In this final section, I propose that West's *Harriet Hume* is itself a kind of ghost story, not just because it ends with Harriet and Condorex as ghosts sharing tea with ghost policemen, but because it makes evident the patterns of repetition that West sees haunting British culture. When left unacknowledged or unexamined, West sees these specters as dangerous, creating a cycle where self-delusion leads to self-

destruction. We see this cycle at work in Condorex's unacknowledged perpetuation of the myth of Mondh, in his subsequent descent into madness, and in the implications that Condorex's fall holds for the imperial system of thought that formulated and justified his Mondh-mythmaking in the first place. However, West also offers an alternative, a way out of this cycle, an opportunity that comes through a kind of self-conscious performance of repetition paired with change. The power of modern art lies, for West, in the ability of the artist to acknowledge the ways that the human process of establishing a sense of self and navigating the world is one of creative construction and to recognize the necessary role that tradition plays in this process, even as the artist re-interprets, re-plots, and re-presents this tradition through his or her own work.

This is the aesthetic that Harriet, the storyteller, both enacts and conveys through her storytelling performances. To make this argument, I focus more specifically on two particular scenes that present examples of what I call "explicit storytelling acts" – the scene that takes place in Chapter One, where Harriet tells Condorex the story of the Dudley sisters while they walk in her garden, and the scene from Chapter Three, where she tells him two stories of her friends' encounters with the ghosts of the Adams brothers and the sphinxes. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I use the term "explicit storytelling acts" to designate incidents of oral storytelling that announce themselves as performances in a much more formal and overt way than other instances of storytelling, such as when Harriet recounts a daydream or her evening at Sir George's. In explicit storytelling scenes, speaker and audience exchange mutual acts of acknowledgement that storytelling is taking place.



While not necessarily formal, per se, these acts can be categorized as ritualistic in their own right, along the lines of the “Once upon a time...” lead-in that begins traditional fairytales. Similar to Paul Goetsch’s idea of “fictive traditional storytelling,” explicit storytelling may take place within and even comment upon an everyday situation, but it is “clearly set off from everyday storytelling because it transcends ordinary experience and includes the fantastic, the supernatural, and the mythic” (Goetsch 186). In this way, Harriet’s lead-in to the tale of the Dudley sisters – “It is a long story...and in part almost improbable” – as well as Condorex’s response of “delight” – “Ah, you little liar...are you well away on one of your fairy tales?” – signals their mutual participation in the performed transmission of a story both acknowledge as imaginative construct (West, *Harriet* 39).

It is in such moments that Harriet most clearly takes on the role of the iconic female oral storyteller, or rather the roles, for Harriet’s performances remind us how flexible and varied this figure can be. With Condorex pulling on her arm “as if he were a child and she his nurse, that had teased him by stopping as Cinderella entered the coach,” she is the quintessential spinner of children’s stories (West, *Harriet* 42). At the same time, her storytelling is an act of seduction. Coyly beginning a story by opening her eyes “so that they looked very innocent” and pursing “her mouth into an ingenuous shape,” Harriet is a storytelling seductress, in the lineage of the sirens or the Sybil of Cumae, who, in an alternative fate to the one invoked by Eliot’s epigraph to “The Waste Land,” also exists in Christian legend as a demon prophetess whose seductions come at the cost of one’s soul (152-153; M. Warner 3-11). Condorex will later accuse Harriet of being “sibylline” (West, *Harriet* 193). Lastly, Harriet is also a

kind of Scheherazade, a woman arguing for her own survival through stories that are meant to entertain and also to instruct, that are both seductive and educational. These moments when the text highlights Harriet's role and her rich ancestry as a female oral storyteller draw attention to the construction both of Harriet's tales and West's own. For each of these storytelling women that Harriet invokes wield, in their own way, a certain amount of power.

Harriet's storytelling in the two explicit storytelling scenes we will examine repeats and re-plots tradition in such a way that challenges accepted divisions of difference and breaks down patriarchal hierarchies. In the first of these scenes, West presents a kind of allegory attesting to the power of art to connect and transform individual beings and to break cycles of repression and violence. Harriet relates this story to Condorex as they walk one evening in her garden. When Condorex comments on the beauty of three uniquely arranged trees, Harriet claims that the trees are actually the Dudley sisters, the three young women immortalized in Joshua Reynolds' painting "The Three Graces Decorating a Statue of Hymen."<sup>55</sup> Harriet goes on to spin the tale of the Dudley sisters. Daughters of aristocratic Londoners, the Dudley sisters mysteriously disappeared for one night when they were infants, and subsequently developed the ability to create elaborate and beautiful flower garlands, which they constantly wore around their necks in a chain connecting each sister. However, unfortunately for the Dudley sisters, social custom dictates that young women must marry, which means giving up their flower garlands and moving to

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<sup>55</sup> This is the name Harriet gives for the painting. However, the painting by Reynolds that she describes was originally called "Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen" (1773). The three women represented in this painting were actually the daughters of an aristocratic family by the name of Montgomery. They were known during their time as the "Irish Graces," as they had grown up in Ireland (Jones).

separate homes, where their beauty quickly fades and their husbands ignore them. One fateful night, despairing in their middle age, the sisters reunite to weave a beautiful garland that connects them once more. As they walk from the eldest sister's house at Portland Place, a gang of young ruffians harasses and pursues them. Fleeing to the spot where Harriet's garden now stands, two of the sisters cower in fear while one spreads her arms as if supplicating the earth, and the three sisters are saved from violence by being transformed into trees.

In this scene, Harriet re-plots what Scott identifies as a "re-cycling" of the Greek myths of Persephone and Daphne into a tale where art presents a possible escape from the repetitive cycles of patriarchy (B. Scott, *Refiguring 2*: 142). There are elements of the fairytale in this story as well, as it includes unexplained wonderful occurrences, not attributed to the work of any god, and magical transformations, both characteristics of the fairytale genre (M. Warner XIX-XX). In this way, Harriet's tale both presents and highlights the mix of older traditions that constitute modern British culture. The Dudley sisters are artists of a kind, gifted with the ability to weave beautiful flower garlands. Unlike Tennyson's artist-weaver figure, the Lady of Shalott, however, the Dudley sisters' status as artists does not isolate them, but rather literally binds them together in sisterhood. Moreover, their organic art contains the power to transform any other natural landscape it falls upon, demonstrating a capacity to alter the world around them.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Indeed, one might argue that this ability to transform any other natural landscape embodies a power and impulse that could be categorized as colonial in nature, albeit that the sisters do not seem concerned with the ramifications of where their flowers fall. If they are eco-imperialists, they are careless ones. The fecundity of their flowers seems connected to the incredible creative power represented by the three sisters, a creative power they share with nature itself.

These female artists have at least some means of escape from the constraints and violence of society, for their transformation into trees seems from Harriet's description to occur as a result of the elder sister's prayer-like supplications to the earth. Their fate is clearly juxtaposed to that of the society girls who dance the waltz at the Blennerhassett club next to Harriet's flat, as the music can be heard in the background while Harriet finishes her story. Following the completion of Harriet's story Condorex distractedly imagines marrying one of these society girls as a transaction made for political, economic, and social gain, creating a link between this tale set at some ambiguous point in the past to the social concerns of the present day. Interestingly, while the third sister in Reynolds' actual painting holds her hands up in the air to place a decoration on the statue of the Hymen, the Greek god of marriage ceremonies, the tree representing this sister in Harriet's garden, the one who enacts the transformation, holds its "hands," or branches, down in supplication to the earth. In this way, Harriet's story (and West's novel) re-plots a gesture elevating the idea of marriage (the three Montgomery sisters, the three historical women who were the actual subjects of Reynolds' painting, were all considered to have made good matches in their marriages (Addison 283)) into a gesture that alludes to an alternative source of power and protection for women, not in nature, per se, but in the immense creative energy that the sisters share, which can be found in nature as well. The transformation of the Dudley sisters saves them not only from the physical violence threatened by the ruffians that pursue them, but also frees them from the spiritual violence that has already been enacted upon them by their marriages.

However, one could also say that this story offers an escape or alternative for Condorex as well, albeit one that he fails to act upon. For in the interim between the completion of Harriet's tale and Condorex's contemplation of finding a society bride, Condorex muses to Harriet, "Well, it is a tale with a happy ending...I would like to be a tree in your garden" (West, *Harriet* 48). Harriet's story transforms the trees in her garden into Reynolds' painting into her version of the Dudley sisters and back into trees, and for at least a moment, it transforms Condorex as well. For that moment, Condorex feels a connection to Harriet as strong as any magical garland. As he tells her, "Harriet, I have never been so sorry to leave anybody in my life," and afterward they continue to walk the lawn "in very comfortable communion" (48). Condorex has a glimpse of a different paradigm for happiness and for being in the world than his ego and ambition typically allow. West's thus presents Harriet's story about the power of art to transform the world as itself potentially transformative.

Harriet's assertion of the power of art comes through even more strongly in her next explicit storytelling scene. During this scene, Harriet begins two different stories, both of which clearly respond to the context that frames them. Having met Harriet in the street on a hot summer's day, Condorex invites her into his home at Portland Place, partly out of genuine enjoyment of her company and partly as a method of distracting himself. Condorex is in the process of intriguing a political coup, and is anxiously awaiting word of whether his bid for power has been successful. In the meantime, Condorex and Harriet engage in a conversation concerning the difference between his political activities and her art. While admitting their methods may be different, Harriet attempts to convince Condorex that they can

exercise the same power and seek the same ends. In its aim of finding expression for “that invisible thing, the will of the people,” Harriet argues that democracy is much like the production of chamber music, where various instruments must blend into a harmonious whole, and thus the leaders of a democracy are like conductors.

Not only is Condorex unconvinced by Harriet’s argument, but he loses interest and stops listening before she can complete her point. The two stories Harriet then goes on to tell are thus intended both to distract Condorex, for Harriet clearly expresses a desire to alleviate his anxious state, and as an alternative method of getting her earlier point across. Both pose and undermine hierarchies that separate and privilege a sphere of activity relating to empire, politics, and commerce over the activities performed by artists.

The first story presents a familiar narrative from Greek and Roman mythology, that of the gods taking vengeance by sentencing the offender to eternal suffering (Prometheus) or a pointless task (Sisyphus). In this case, however, the offending party is the Adam brothers, Scottish architects whose austere, pastoral designs were extremely popular in early Victorian England. The brothers have incurred the wrath of “the Romans, and especially their gods,” both because the Romans do not like their aesthetic and because the Roman gods dislike how the Adam brothers use statues of their likeness as part of their interior design (153). Thus the brothers have been sentenced to herd a flock of headless sheep through London, the ghosts of sheep whose heads the brothers incorporated into their architecture as well.

Like the earlier story of the Dudley sisters, this story provides a set of artist figures, the brothers Adam, juxtaposed with a patriarchal and authoritarian force, Rome and the Roman gods having already been consistently associated with the British empire and with Condorex himself. Yet the Adam brothers are also on occasion associated with Condorex, although far less often and less prominently than Rome. Condorex's home was designed by the Adam brothers. At one point, he surprises himself with the realization that his desire to live in the "prevailing harmony" of the house they designed, a house he was able to buy using the money and prestige he earned in politics, demonstrates that his ambitions are not in fact completely ignoble and without beauty (129). Thus one might say that through this story, Harriet is presenting to Condorex a kind of figurative portrait of himself and of the opposing factions within him, one driven by the desire for power and the other by the desire for beauty.

Unlike the earlier tale of the Dudley sisters, in which art was a vehicle of transformation and escape, in this re-plotting the creative genius of art has not only the power of resistance, but of mastery. For according to the "ebb and flow" of their genius, the Adam brothers are able to turn the tides, and at these points the Roman gods must serve them. In an example of such an occurrence, Harriet describes Apollo's disgust at having to be a statue in a dining room alcove. Thus, Harriet plots a reversal of the politics-art hierarchy that Condorex earlier propounded. Moreover, while Condorex may not see himself in Harriet's tale, her story does successfully convince Condorex of at least one commonality between their professions – both

Harriet and Condorex claim to recognize the headless sheep herded by the Adam brothers from their audiences at concert halls and political meetings.

Harriet's final story, delivered shortly after that of the Adam brothers, presents what is perhaps the strongest argument for the power of art, and also demonstrates what could, perhaps, be considered a potential weakness. In this tale, Harriet re-plots one traditional formula for a ghost story, for she and Condorex have just been discussing the issue of whether imaginary beings created by art, such as the Adam brothers' sheep, can have ghosts. In Harriet's tale, a young woman walking home through the streets of London late at night encounters two unearthly beings – a pair of enormous sphinxes, apparently decorations from a home of the Adam brothers' design, as they walk they walk down Regents Street during the "Hour of Animation" (157). In a kind of reversal of the typical ghost story formula, the sphinxes are far more frightened and disgusted than the girl. As works of art whose significance stretches back millenniums, the sphinxes are horrified when they realize that the being they are addressing is not another work of art but "belongs to that abhorrent species which is subject to time" (157). It is the human girl here who represents death, who is the specter.

The comparison being made here is not unfamiliar in modernism – actual human beings are flesh and blood and subject to decay, while art, which is abstract and works through symbols, has the ability and power to transcend time. Certainly, the fact that the art artifacts in this story are sphinxes, a symbolic figure that has a history and significance that has outlasted two ancient empires (the Egyptian and the Greek) into the present day, emphasizes this point. However, Harriet never gets to



finish this story. Her tale asserting art's timelessness is poignantly interrupted by the chiming of a clock, which distracts Condorex completely by reminding him of the pressing importance of his momentarily forgotten political schemes. On the one hand, we might say that this distraction demonstrates a failing in Condorex, as his political ambitions once again prevent him from grasping the full meaning and import of what Harriet is attempting to teach him through her stories. However, the interruption of the clock also could be read as an objection to the major claim of Harriet's tale, which seems to pose art as superior to life, making Harriet, and this particular re-plotting, potential subjects of critique. The chiming occurs just as Harriet is really digging into an exegesis of the 'moral' of her story, as she tells Condorex:

...it was obvious that works of art feel towards human beings exactly how we do towards ghosts. The transparency of spectres, the diffuseness in space which let's them drift through doors and walls, and their smell of death, disgust us not more than we disgust works of art by our meaninglessness, our diffuseness in time which lets us drift through three score years and ten without a quarter as much significance as a picture establishes instantaneously, and our smell of life. (157-158)

The interruption, which follows immediately after these lines, seems to assert that while the artifacts or symbols of art may be 'timeless,' the meaning and efficacy of art is, in fact, tied to time and to context. It is humans, after all, that give art and tradition meaning, and humans live in a temporal world, a world with which art and tradition must engage if it is itself to remain alive and vital. This issue resurfaces at

the conclusion of West's own novel and arguably complicates our reading of the ending, which I will now turn to for the final section of this chapter.

### **Conclusion**

Given Condorex's fleeting but heartfelt proclamation after hearing the tale of the Dudley sisters that it would be a "happy ending" to be a tree in Harriet's garden, it is perhaps only fitting that we find Harriet and Condorex back in her garden at the novel's end. Harriet's final directing of the garden orchestra, which causes her garden to bloom, enacts what one could call a kind of re-plotting of that space, just as her storytelling enacts a kind of re-plotting of tradition that is, in West's formulation, also a revival. Unlike T. S. Eliot's "waste land" dirge for modern culture, which begins with the assertion "April is the cruelest month," West's spring is a time of renewal. Like every other spring it is both a repetition and a new birth.

Yet, the conclusion of West's novel, while it ends with Harriet and Condorex reconciled and this vibrant celebration of Harriet's creative powers, is not quite as prettily settled as the novel's final words, wishing Harriet and Condorex "A Very Happy Eternity," may at first seem to imply. This reconciliation and celebration is preceded by both Condorex and Harriet admitting their shortcomings to each other. Condorex recognizes that his will to dominate and control others and the world led him to self-delusion and intended murder. Harriet, in turn, expresses regret that she had not been more like Condorex, for while her life was dedicated to beauty, she lacked the "power to impose my state on the rest of society" (266). As she tells Condorex, "I may have been innocent, but I was also impotent...Humanity would be

unbearably lackadaisical if there were none but my kind alive” (266-267). Harriet regrets that her dedication to art and beauty did not have a greater impact on the world. On the one hand, Harriet’s conducting of the garden seems to assert a newly found potency; on the other hand, both she and Condorex are dead, and the spirit world they enter, like the world occupied by the sphinxes in Harriet’s earlier story, is outside of time. Can the reconciliation of opposites – art and politics, beauty and action – occur only in a fantastical space severed from the actual temporal world of daily life?

Perhaps we could say that West’s novel is itself intended to be a way out of this conundrum, as it is itself a work of art that vocally, and at some points in overtly didactic ways, ties art and tradition to the social issues of its own time – issues of gender, of empire, of class and economics. West’s vision of tradition, as depicted in her portrayal of London in *Harriet Hume* and enacted through the storytelling figure of Harriet herself, is of a vibrant inheritance constantly present in and shaping the lives of individuals within early twentieth-century British culture. Much like a map, tradition is a shared cultural schema for understanding the world, but also like a map, the borders and boundaries are shifting. The artist can alter this tradition by re-plotting it, and by re-plotting this tradition the artist changes the present. Ultimately, these kinds of alterations are possible because of the way that British tradition is itself composed of a complex network of overlapping traditions – Greek and Roman myth, literary fairytales, and folk tales. In this way, West’s role as a novelist is similar to Harriet’s description of a conductor in her earlier conversation with Condorex, which,

in turn, Harriet compares to the job of a politician: each in their own way ideally weaves together discreet voices to create a harmonious whole.

Oral storytelling plays a central role in West's own re-plotting of gender relations and hierarchies of social power. Harriet's self-conscious performances highlight cultural narratives of the feminine while simultaneously working to undermine oppressive stereotypes. In a way, West's deployment of storytelling performance aims to draw attention to and, potentially, change the stories her culture tells, and, in turn, to change the way that individuals within her culture think about themselves and their relation to others. The next chapter of this project examines the work of another modernist writer who is also interested in exploring connections between narrative and subject formation, Virginia Woolf. However, while some "re-plotting" may occur over the course of *The Waves*, the text by Woolf that we will examine, Woolf appears more interested in what might be called the possibilities of not-plotting. Simultaneously acknowledging and resisting the will-to-story, her work constantly draws attention to points where narrative, or narrative the way that it is traditionally constructed, fails to authentically convey human experience.

**Chapter 4**  
**“Bernard said...”: Unnatural Oral Storytelling and Hypermediate Reading in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves***

*I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey; life itself going on.*

-Virginia Woolf, writing of *The Waves*, May 28<sup>th</sup> 1929

Like Conrad’s *Outcast of the Islands* and West’s *Harriet Hume*, Virginia Woolf’s 1931 experimental text *The Waves* deploys oral storytelling as a means of exploring the role of cultural narratives in the process of subject formation; however, Woolf’s text also differs in broadening the levels on which “story” is engaged. Woolf explores not just the relation between subjectivity and the content-patterns of stories, but also how the formal conventions according to which these stories are constructed and the medium through which they are received affect an individual’s sense of embodied identity – that is, the sense of being a conscious body within the material world, in relation to others, and at a particular moment in time. This is not to say that Conrad and West were unconcerned with matters of novelistic form or physical medium. Conrad’s *Outcast* uses an innovative, “unsettling” mode of narration in order to undermine the comfortable authority typically expected from a third-person limited omniscient narrator. West’s *Harriet Hume* is fraught with examples of characters engaging with various physical media in ways that draw attention to the materiality of bodies and space. *The Waves*, however, differs substantially both in the degree of its focus on form and medium and in the ways in which this focus fundamentally troubles this highly self-conscious text. Woolf envisioned *The Waves* as a written work that would directly and authentically communicate the modern

experience, one that would convey, as she states in her diary, “life itself going on” (Woolf, *Diary Three* 229). However, this text’s focus on story form and its own status as a written medium constantly draws attention to the impossibility of overcoming some kind of mediation.

All storytelling in *The Waves* is oral storytelling, and yet none of it is. I propose that we call this impasse “unnatural” oral storytelling, “unnatural” being both a narratological term for narratives that defy traditional conventions<sup>57</sup> and an apt indicator of the sense of discomfiture felt by the reader. Woolf’s text engages the notion of orality on several levels. In addition to posing a central storytelling figure, Bernard, who serves as a vehicle through which Woolf critiques her literary predecessors, *The Waves* invokes orality through what I call its “oral-mode” of narration – the looping refrain of “X said...” that voices the soliloquies of the text’s six central characters and alternates with the text’s other narrative mode, in which an unnamed narrator describes a scene primarily, but not exclusively, focused on a deserted beach over the course of a day. This oral-mode both invokes and rejects notions of transparency and presence traditionally associated with the spoken word as it appears in writing. The appearance of quotation marks in fiction typically denotes a direct transcription of a character’s words as they are spoken aloud or of his or her thoughts delivered as a kind of internal soliloquy, instances that Dorrit Cohn refers to as “quoted monologue” (D. Cohn, *Transparent* 12-13). In *The Waves* this is not the

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<sup>57</sup> I use the term “unnatural” here with a nod to unnatural narrative theory, according to which an “unnatural narrative” is a “narrative that violates the conventions of nonfictional ‘natural’ narratives (stories told by individuals to each other in a social setting) or other realistic or mimetic conventions. Alternatively, a narrative whose storyworld contains physical or logical impossibilities” (“Narrative”). *The Waves* is an “unnatural narrative” both in that it defies traditional mimetic conventions and presents what appears to be physically impossibilities. For a more comprehensive consideration of “unnatural narrative” and the study of such texts (“unnatural narratology”), see the article “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models” (2010) by Jan Alber, Stephen Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson.

case. Instead the quoted soliloquies present a single voice narrating what is apparently a description of the internal workings of the mind of each character as he or she goes about daily life. Rejecting this typical convention for representing speech has several repercussions, perhaps the most obvious of which is that Woolf's text immediately draws attention to it.

One of the places the unnaturalness of Woolf's narration can be felt most acutely is in scenes that feature *The Waves*' central storytelling figure, Bernard. While neither *Outcast* nor *Harriet Hume* belong in the category of the realist novel, both represent the oral storytelling scene in a relatively familiar and mimetic fashion. Even in *Harriet Hume*, where Harriet's ability to read Condorex's mind obviously places the text in the science fiction/fantasy genre, West presents the oral storytelling scene as an exchange that takes place by word of mouth between a speaker and an audience whose actions and relations within a physical space are clearly delineated. *The Waves*, on the other hand, estranges us from the familiar storytelling scene. Because we have only the single narrative voice describing what goes on in the mind of our storyteller, our access to his storytelling is always a step removed. Rather than a direct transcription of Bernard's speech, the text provides a voice describing Bernard's thoughts as he speaks. Unless the information is offered within the soliloquy of Bernard or one of his listeners, we don't know the complete context of the storytelling scene. Sometimes it is even unclear whether Bernard is telling stories aloud or solely to himself. Moreover, at times character interactions surrounding Bernard's storytelling defy natural laws, as when characters respond to and critique stories that we as readers are certain were told only in Bernard's head. Ultimately

what this unnatural oral storytelling format will do is challenge the notion that traditional, supposedly mimetic written representations of storytelling are as “natural” as we typically accept them to be.

Virginia Woolf had a lifelong fascination with the relationships between language, consciousness, and the material world – although one might say that the degree to which these three categories can be regarded as separate entities is a question that *The Waves* itself raises. She saw interconnections among the dominant modes of representation in a given time period, material conditions, and what could be called the cultural consciousness of that age. She portrays a sense of a wide gulf between actual experience and the representation of experience. This gulf was both an obstacle to be overcome and a prolific source of inspiration, as many of her novels and short stories present ambitious attempts to create a written form that more accurately represents human consciousness and lived experience.

Such a characterization of Woolf’s driving interest in the connection between art and the perception of experience should not be taken as corroborating earlier critical evaluations that relegate Woolf to the category of “high modernist,” in the company of other early twentieth-century writers whose interests were deemed as inward and aesthetic, rather than social or political.<sup>58</sup> Over the past few decades, Woolf scholars have increasingly rejected this view, as well as a purely formalistic approach to Woolf’s work. As a result, ample criticism has emerged that brings to the

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<sup>58</sup> One of the most prominent sources this kind of framing of modernist experimentalism can be traced back to is the work of Marxist philosopher and critic György Lukács (1885-1971). Lukács argues that modernism’s focus on individual consciousness and stylistic innovation are symptomatic of middle class decadence that sought to avoid engagement with social issues and that the obscure and/or fragmented literature produced by modernists both demonstrates and intensifies the alienation he saw as widespread under capitalism. See Lukács’ essay “Realism in the Balance” (1938) and his chapter “The Ideology of Modernism” in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957).



forefront Woolf's interventions, both via her art and in her personal life, in the politics of her time; however, I would argue that a full understanding of Woolf's politics requires a turn back to her aesthetics. My own focus on the formal and stylistic aspects of Woolf's *The Waves* comes from the conviction that Woolf's aesthetic interests are indivisible from her interest in and understanding of the material, social world. As Jane Goldman states, Woolf's "experimentations with the poetical in her novels are bound up in her feminist interventions in the politics of gender, class, and empire" (Goldman 50).

Woolf often acknowledged that modes of representation are culturally and historically specific. In "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927), for example, Woolf attributes the development and success of poetic drama as the dominant mode of representation during the Elizabethan Age in part to material conditions having to do with distance between villages and urban centers and education levels of the general population. In contrast, prose writing, and the novel in particular, has become the more dominant mode of representation of the modern age because of the peculiar state of simultaneous personal isolation and global connection enjoyed by the individual in the modern city. However, while material circumstances of history and culture may lead to the development or success of specific types of literature or art, popular modes and conventions of representation also inflect individual understanding of identity and social relations. Woolf expresses such an idea in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with her claim that the subordinate position of women in British society is both reflected and perpetuated by literary representations of them, and that changing these representations is a key step towards undoing destructive

social hierarchies. The narrative experimentation of *The Waves* is fundamentally grounded in Woolf's conviction that art not only reflects, but actively shapes individual understanding of the world.

Woolf's *The Waves* presents her attempt to reimagine the form of the novel and its relation to readers in order to more authentically represent and communicate the modern. In so doing, she offers a paradigm for understanding and reconceptualizing the formation of modern selfhood, a process that Woolf sees as inextricably tied to both methods and media of storytelling. Both orality and an oral storyteller play a central role in executing this reimagining. The first part of this chapter explores the character of Bernard as a figure both in line with, and demonstrating some notable differences from, the oral storytellers we have looked at so far. Bernard is an overt storyteller. From his youth, Bernard thinks of himself as a novelist (although his writing ability is an issue that will be addressed separately in the second section of this chapter). The other characters recognize and comment upon his storytelling abilities, and the text portrays him engaged in oral storytelling – though as I have already pointed out, at times this unnaturally portrayed storytelling challenges our traditional definition. Driven by what might be called, drawing on Hayden White's notion of "emplotment," a will-to-emplot,<sup>59</sup> Bernard uses stories to order and understand his experiences in the world and to connect with others. This will-to-emplot, however, consistently encounters resistance in the form of critiques of

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<sup>59</sup> This phrasing of a "will-to-emplot" may invoke for some readers Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power," a key concept of Nietzsche's philosophy that he first introduces in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) but continues to develop over the course of his subsequent works. A full explanation of this concept thus requires more space than a footnote; however, Nietzsche's "will to power" can be roughly understood as a kind of life-drive, a drive to expend creative energy that pervades all living things. While the idea of a "will-to-emplot" is not intended to be analogous to Nietzsche's "will to power," I would argue that the former, like the latter, could be understood as a kind of primal instinct, although this idea is ultimately a notion that Woolf questions and explores.

Bernard's storytelling that appear in Bernard's own soliloquies, in the soliloquies of his friends, and in situations where Bernard finds himself incapable of finishing a story. These resistances convey Woolf's critique of traditional storytelling, especially the novelistic conventions she associates with her Edwardian predecessors. They also reflexively gesture towards and occasionally question the efficacy of her own attempt to authentically represent modern experience through her experimental narrative. On a fundamental level, *The Waves* is a narration that questions or resists itself.

In addition, orality has another function in *The Waves*, one that corresponds with (but does not necessarily resolve) the tension between the text's underlying drive to represent "life itself going on" and the limitations inherent in the medium through which it attempts to perform this representation. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that Woolf's deployment of this oral mode contributes to the creation of what I would like to call, borrowing a term from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, a "hypermediate" reading experience, one that draws attention to the reader's own present encounter with *The Waves* itself as a physical medium. *The Waves* emphasizes the role that physical media – both written and oral/aural – play in constituting the parameters of embodied identity. In this way, *The Waves* gestures towards the even broader exploration of the relation between media and embodied identity that Woolf undertakes in her final, unfinished novel *Between the Acts* (1941).

My work in this chapter intersects with several growing fields of interest in Woolf studies, including discussions of what Jessica Berman calls Woolf's "ethical-aesthetic"<sup>60</sup> and of Woolf's engagement with technology. We will consider the latter

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<sup>60</sup> Berman first uses this term in her article "Ethical Folds: Ethics, Aesthetics, Woolf" (2004) to refer to Woolf's use of aesthetic techniques and choices to create what Berman calls "ethical folds," instances within texts which

more closely at the beginning of the second part of this chapter, but here I will offer a brief explanation of how I see this chapter engaging the former. Laura Doyle notes in her introduction to the 2004 *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on Woolf that Woolf's work is fundamentally concerned with the question of "what's between us?" (Doyle 1). This question is one that has ethical as well as aesthetic implications (2). For Woolf, as for other modernist writers we have looked at, storytelling is unquestionably one of those things that exists "between us" – that shapes our understanding of the boundary of self as separate from and in relation to others and to the world. This is precisely why Woolf's criticism of the Edwardians in essays such as "Modern Fiction" (1919/1924) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924/1950)<sup>61</sup> is, as we shall see, so vehement. A group designated by Woolf as consisting of H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett – all popular novelists and, in the case of Wells and Bennett, prominent and prolific literary critics – the Edwardians represent a kind of greater literary establishment whose failure as artists occurs on multiple levels. Their misrepresentations of experience shape (or misshape) understandings of the self and the nature of relations among individuals within their society. Moreover, not only do they misrepresent experience, but in what we might consider, with a nod to our earlier discussions of Conrad's *Outcast*, a Lingard-esque

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bring the universal and the personal into relation and constitute a commensurable connection between self and others without eliminating differences. She expands on this idea in her chapter on Woolf and Jean Rhys in her recently published work *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (2012). For another approach to the connection between ethics and aesthetics in Woolf's work, see Lee Oser's chapter on Woolf in *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett* (2007).

<sup>61</sup> "Modern Fiction" is a revision of an earlier essay, "Modern Novels," which was published in the April 10, 1919, edition of the *Times Literary Supplement*. It appeared in its revised form in the 1925 publication of *The Common Reader*. Citations of "Modern Fiction" in this chapter are from the latter text. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" was originally titled "Character in Fiction" and delivered as a paper to the Heretics at Cambridge on May 18, 1924. It was revised and published later that year by Hogarth Press under the title "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," and again published by Leonard Woolf in 1950 as part of the collection *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. Citations of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in this chapter are from this 1950 edition.

manner, they are blind to their own misrepresentation of it as well as to the possibility that the world might be seen differently.

### **Emplotment and Resistance: Narrating New Realism in Woolf's *The Waves***

As a storytelling figure within an experimental narrative that is, as Woolf wrote in her diary, “not trying to tell a story,” Bernard has garnered an enormous amount of critical attention (Woolf, *Diary Three* 229). Some have drawn close connections between author and character. Herta Newman describes Bernard as one of Woolf’s “self-revealing projections,” in the manner of Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse* (Newman 59). Eric Warner proposes that each of the six characters of *The Waves* represent an aspect of Woolf’s own personality, with Bernard representing her impulse to write novels and even, during the final soliloquy, acting as a mouthpiece for Woolf’s aesthetic views (E. Warner 82-84). On the other end of the spectrum, Jane Marcus argues that Bernard represents the white patriarchal order of male writers whose ideologies and dominance Woolf aims to overthrow (Marcus, *Hearts* 61-62). Most certainly, Bernard is a vehicle through which Woolf explores issues of representation; however, I argue that what makes Bernard so engaging and so central to the interpretation of Woolf’s text is in fact the equivocal way in which he is presented, both subject to intense critique and granted a certain degree of insightfulness.

Following the pattern of other modernist storytellers – Benjamin’s pre-modern tale-teller, Conrad’s Marlow, West’s Harriet Hume – Bernard is a hybrid, a composite figure, and Woolf uses him as a vehicle through which she can both critique previous

literary traditions, particularly those Woolf associates with the Edwardians, and explore the possibility of a new kind of storytelling, what I am calling Woolf's "new realism."<sup>62</sup> Woolf's text often associates Bernard with the Edwardian novelists whose methods she is so critical of in essays like "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "Modern Fiction." Bernard and these writers share similar storytelling habits and receive similar criticism. Some of Bernard's stories invoke tropes and patterns of imperial romance, a genre to which many Edwardian novelists contributed.<sup>63</sup> Yet at the same time, Bernard often engages in a degree of reflection not attributed to the Edwardians by Woolf, and his desire to connect with others and to represent reality at times puts at least his aims more in line with Woolf and her modernist contemporaries.

This section examines the character of Bernard as a storyteller who deploys story – by which I mean culturally inflected patterns of both content and form – as a means of interpreting experience and connecting with others. As such, he serves to highlight the conventions according to which stories are built and the way that these stories function to mediate and shape individual understanding of the self and the relation between self and world. In the pages that follow, I examine instances of resistance to Bernard's storytelling that critique and rewrite traditional narrative. I

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<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the recurrent image of Bernard blowing words as smoke rings during his stories and interpersonal interactions recalls Woolf's description of Marlow from her 1924 essay-tribute to Conrad in the *Times Literary Supplement* just after his death, which was later reprinted in *The Common Reader* (1925). Woolf describes Marlow, who she sees as a part of Conrad's own persona, as a "born observer" who "liked nothing better than to sit on deck...smoking and recollecting, smoking and speculating; sending after his smoke beautiful rings of words until all the summer's night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke" (Woolf, "Joseph" 226). While these smoke ring-words are beautiful, implicit in Woolf's description of how they "clouded" the night sky is that they also somehow obscure vision. However, "Marlow [did not] live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars. He had a habit of opening his eyes suddenly and looking – at a rubbish heap, at a port, at a shop counter – and then complete in its burning right of light that thing is flashed bright upon the mysterious background" (226). All in all, as we shall see, Bernard is also a curious mixture of obliviousness and sudden flashes of insight.

<sup>63</sup> For an engaging article connecting H. G. Wells' science fiction to the genre of imperial romance, see Paul A. Cantor and Peter Hufnagel's "The Empire of the Future: Imperialism and Modernism in H. G. Wells" (2006).

begin by looking at resistances that expose and undermine imperialist cultural narratives of racial superiority and entitlement that we have discussed previously in connection to the genres of early travel narrative and imperial romance. In much the same way as West's Arnold Condorex, Bernard at times appears as an offspring of the imperial narrator, inheriting and repeating a particular worldview he has received secondhand.<sup>64</sup>

In *The Waves*, storytelling serves as a means of establishing a sense of embodied identity. Many of the characters invoke cultural narratives in order to schematize the relationship between self and world. Young Louis, for example, imagines himself as a member of a royal court as he nervously pauses before entering a teacher's office: "As I stand here with my hand on the grained oak panel of Mr. Wickham's door I think myself the friend of Richelieu, or the Duke of St. Simon holding out a snuff-box to the King himself" (Woolf, *Waves* 52).<sup>65</sup> Louis here aligns himself with historical figures, a pattern he repeats through *The Waves*. That these historical figures are royalty or are affiliated with royalty and power expresses Louis' feelings of superiority to his peers. It also fulfills his desire to negate his feelings of being an outsider to British society, a position he senses himself as locked into by his Australian nationality. Louis' daydreamed self-imaginings often project him into the past in part because he seeks through them to escape the present reality of his, as he calls it, "unenviable body – my large nose, my thin lips, my colonial accent," the last

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<sup>64</sup> Since Jane Marcus' groundbreaking 1992 essay "Britannia Rules *The Waves*," numerous critics have explored various levels of critique of empire in Woolf's text. However, my focus on Bernard as an unnatural oral storyteller allows me to present a new contribution to these conversations by elucidating connections between Woolf's consideration of the formal conventions of literary representation and the development of certain kinds of subjectivities and social hierarchies both within British culture as well as in Britain's relations to its colonies.

<sup>65</sup> Armand Jean du Plessis de Richelieu (1585-1642) was a French Catholic Cardinal who served as King Louis XIII's chief minister. There were two Dukes of St. Simon, Claude de Rouvroy (1607-1693) and his son Louis de Rouvroy (1675-1755).

of which seems to particularly and inescapably mark him as “other” (a point to which we will return later in this chapter) (52-53). Of course, as Louis himself realizes, these self-imaginings, which are easiest to sustain in the darkness of night, must be reconciled with the physical reality of “grained oak doors,” like the one he must knock upon to gain entrance to the headmaster’s office. Yet they still serve to help Louis schematize his relation to the world around him.

Other characters deploy similar kinds of imaginative projections, invocations of cultural tropes or patterns, in order to negotiate and assert a sense of selfhood. Isolated and lonely while at school, Rhoda imagines of herself as a Russian Empress (56). Even Susan, whose narration tends to be more exteriorly focused on the immediate, material world, daydreams at one point of finding a husband, of having children, of becoming “like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards” (99). Yet, it is Bernard, with his desire to become a novelist and his impulse to narrate life’s events into a tellable sequence, who most clearly provides insight into how stories constitute a template for understanding individual experience and identity. As Madeline Moore has noted, Bernard uses “story” to structure the chaos of thoughts and impressions that saturate his daily life (Moore 235).

Throughout *The Waves*, Bernard is distracted, at times even overwhelmed, by the influx of his perceptions and emotions. His response is to use story to order these perceptions and emotions. As Bernard explains: “I must open the little trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another. I will tell you the story of the doctor” (49). As a child leaving for school for



the first time, he resorts to the making of “phrases” in order to cope with the anxiety of a new situation, one that threatens his sense of self. As he states, “Everybody seems to be doing things for this moment only; and never again. Never again. The urgency of it all is fearful. Everybody knows that I am going to school, going to school for the first time” (30). Bernard feels the oppressive weight of being subject to outside forces, which he communicates through his sense of being under the gaze of housemaids and clocks. In response, Bernard deploys language to establish a protective barrier that is also an assertion of agency over his own subjectivity: “I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry” (30).

In a fashion, Woolf’s portrayal of Bernard’s use of story to order and understand his experiences prefigures Hayden White’s notion of “emplotment.” According to White, writers of historical texts take past events and “emplot” them into a culturally recognized narrative type, like tragedy, romance, or satire. Through this “emplotment,” they present past events as meaningful within a specific cultural framework (H. White, “Historical” 193-196). Without denying the existence of History, White argues that in order to present past events as a narrative, historians must rely on literary, or figurative, discourse, which is to a certain degree culturally relative. Woolf’s portrayal demonstrates the power of culturally reified conventions of storytelling to shape not only our concepts of the past but also our awareness of the present and the continuous process by which we formulate the boundaries of the self within the world. Bernard, in his attempts to make his experiences understandable by

narrating them as story, makes the same kinds of moves that White discerns in the formation of historical narrative, using his storytelling to, as White phrases it, “familiarize the unfamiliar,” making it comprehensible (196). Bernard is thus a kind of intermittent historical narrator of the present, “emplotting” the events of his life into narrative patterns that endow them with meaning. This “emplotting” simultaneously establishes a sense of Bernard’s subjectivity, which is in turn also culturally inflected.

Bernard’s characterization of Percival illustrates his use of emplotment and how his story-making impulse often follows a culturally determined pattern. Bernard envisions Percival as a romantic figure along the lines of a stock character of the hero from an imperial romance.<sup>66</sup> We can see characteristics of this genre, and the related genre of early imperial travel narrative, at work elsewhere in Bernard’s storytelling even before Percival’s introduction. For example, the two adventures that the child Bernard narrates to his playmates – Susan and Jinny – during the first set of soliloquies follow the spatial trajectory of traditional imperial romance, taking Bernard and his companion from home to an utterly foreign land of mystery and danger and back again. Bernard uses the language of exploration to describe his “journey” with Susan to the land of Elvedon: “We are the first to come here. We are the discoverers of an unknown land” (Woolf, *Waves* 17). Bernard’s description of Elvedon echoes the travel narratives of early explorers. The landscape is lush and overgrown, filled with giant animals and the sound of “primeval” fir cones falling (17). Similarly, the adventure story Bernard relates to Jinny takes them to a “malarial

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<sup>66</sup> The genre of “imperial romance” is a subject of lengthy focus in my second chapter, which examines the role of storytelling in Conrad’s *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896).

jungle” inhabited by lions, cobras, eagles, vultures, and an elephant “killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye” (22).

Later in life, however, it is Percival who journeys to the British colony in India, leaving Bernard to imaginatively project his life there. At Percival’s farewell dinner, Bernard narrates<sup>67</sup> a story of Percival in India, in which Percival solves the “Oriental problem” by righting a tipped cart (136). Bernard’s “India” shares similarities with his Elvedon and “malarial jungle.” It stands outside the flow of time (“Time seemed endless, ambition vain” (136).) All three locales exude a sense of decay. Bernard envisions the “natives” in starkly racist, near-animal terms, as they “swarm round...chattering excitedly” (136). Against this backdrop, Percival rises as a heroic figure. Although he rides a “flea-bitten mare,” Percival arrives wearing a “sun-helmet” (an apt symbol for the British Empire, on which the “sun never sets”) and uses the language of the West to achieve God-like status among the locals by dislodging the cart from the mud (136).

However, this characterization of Percival moves in two directions simultaneously. On one level, it demonstrates Bernard’s employment of Percival according to the cultural narratives of “East-West” relations propagated by British imperialism. Yet, at the same time, elements of Bernard’s own description work against this narrative and its fundamental premise that the colonizers of the “West” are innately superior to the colonized. The comparison Bernard draws as he describes India reveals that the roots of his vision lie in a construction of the “East” that has no

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<sup>67</sup> This instance is one of several ambiguous, “unnatural” oral storytelling moments where Bernard may, or may not, be telling his story out loud. There is no clear indication that other characters have heard or are responding to Bernard’s story, yet each of the characters in this section to some degree soliloquizes about Percival, opening up the possibility that they might be discussing him even if we as readers don’t have a transcription of their conversation.

connection to India itself. As Bernard describes India: “I see the gilt and crenellated buildings which have an air of fragility and decay as if they were temporarily run up buildings in some Oriental exhibition” (136). Bernard fashions his vision of “India” after an exhibition model. Moreover, even as Bernard’s description of Percival himself invokes heroism, the nature of Percival’s mundane dealings with carts is far out of proportion to the conclusion that Bernard draws (“the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved” (136)). Bernard’s own awareness of this incongruity is not evident, yet its presence creates a kind of subtle narrative layering that could be called “double-employment.” It shifts Bernard’s romantic/heroic tale into an ironic one and exposes the former as a narrative that, like the temporary buildings of an Oriental exhibition, is the construct of an imperial culture’s imagination and allows this culture to maintain a particular self-image. Moreover, this double-employment makes the process of employment itself more visible.

The greatest blow to Bernard’s heroic employment of Percival comes with the latter’s ignominious end, as Percival dies from injuries incurred as he is thrown from a horse. The text’s implication that this accident occurred during some sort of race is particularly significant, given the important role of games and sport culture in sustaining British imperialism. Linda Dryden has demonstrated the role played by what she calls the British public school “cult of athleticism” in supporting the imperial project in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century (Dryden 23). She argues that through a heavy emphasis on sports as a form of physical activity that teaches leadership and the value of “fair play,” the public school system sought to

transform the average school-boy into a man physically and morally fit and rightfully worthy of wielding power over the colonies (23-24).<sup>68</sup> Percival is a consummate schoolboy athlete. Bernard, Neville, and Louis all at various times remark upon Percival's prowess at games such as cricket while at school, and his talent is obviously part of what makes him the leader of the group of "boasting boys" to which Louis and Neville long to belong (Woolf, *Waves* 46). Bernard's emplotment of Percival as imperial hero thus extends a familiar pattern. For Percival to die in India while participating in a game unsettles Bernard's original emplotment of him, as imperial heroes should die (if they die) heroically and in a manner that reinforces the superiority of British values. More than this, however, Percival's death also unsettles the heroic narrative of British imperialism itself. The purpose of athletic games is to enable schoolboys to develop the skills and morals to perform the work of Empire, to bring "civilization" to the savage world. Yet, as the consummate former schoolboy athlete, what we actually see Percival engaged in, from our brief view of Percival in India, is merely more games. From this perspective, Percival's final letter to Neville offers a complete summary of the activities of Empire: "I am about to play quoits with the colonel, and so no more" (Woolf, *Waves* 152).

Percival's death thus undermines Bernard's emplotment on several levels. It refuses the expected pattern of how a heroic Englishman should live (and die) abroad and undercuts the authenticity of this pattern itself. Percival's death also confronts Bernard with that which is outside the realm of his storytelling: death and nonbeing. Thinking of Percival's death, Bernard finds himself in a state of confusion, imagining

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<sup>68</sup> For an in depth exploration of the relationship between games and empire in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British educational system, see Linda Dryden's chapter on "Making the Imperial Hero" in *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance* (Dryden 23-29).

himself facing something that is “abstract...eyeless at the end of the avenue, in the sky” (154). He senses in Percival’s demise something that cannot be penetrated by words and so brought into the circle of his understanding. Attempting to suture this aporia, Bernard fumbles to find a new narrative to account for and find a pattern of meaning Percival’s life and death. He considers the possibility of Percival as a ridiculous figure (“...I should be able to place him in trifling and ridiculous situations...”), but ultimately settles on shifting his emplotment of Percival’s death into a kind of tragedy. Bernard imagines himself assuring the passersby that they have lost a great hero, reasserting the imperial narrative. He also juxtaposes his own son’s birth with Percival’s death, positing a kind of balance or at least a heavy-handed substitution that allows him (though not Woolf’s narrative) eventually to re-establish “the usual order” (155). White claims that historians “succeed in endowing sets of past events with meanings, over and above whatever comprehension they provide by appeal to putative causal laws, [or] by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions” (H. White, “Historical” 201). In a similar fashion, Bernard offsets Death with Life, in the form of his son, so that the daily life of the British Empire marches on. For Bernard, Percival is now a poignant and nostalgic representation of opportunities lost. While the shock of Percival’s death pushes Bernard “outside the machine” of daily life and his impulse to narrate, he eventually returns and yearns to resolve his anxiety and sadness over Percival’s death through story. His soliloquy ends with Bernard taking a train to Jinny’s, where he plans to “do penance” by telling her about the time he failed to meet Percival at Hampton Court (158).

Despite Bernard's (though not the text's) sense of resolution on this matter, his attempts to understand his experiences through story repeatedly meet with this kind of resistance, and at times even Bernard doubts his story's efficacy in establishing an all-inclusive order. Underlying these doubts are questions concerning not only the kinds of cultural narratives Bernard has chosen to draw upon, but also the specific narrative conventions he follows. The remainder of this section will focus on moments of resistance to Bernard's storytelling that relate to two categories of narration: character-narration and temporality. *The Waves* demonstrates how these two categories, which constitute formal parameters of how stories are told, also serve as fundamental means by which individuals come to have a sense of self within the world and in relation to others. Drawing into question the deployment of these conventions by her Edwardian forbearers, Woolf attempts to reinvent them in such a way that more authentically represents the modern experience and opens new possibilities for formulating subjectivity.

***“Let me then create you”: Character-narration and Materiality***

One of the major loci of resistance to Bernard's storytelling centers on the idea that his stories fail to encompass the true nature of his subjects because of the kind of emphasis they place on materiality. Riding home from school on the train, Bernard encounters an unknown individual and begins to create a “story” for him. Bernard narrates the life of this man in order to integrate him into the coherent vision Bernard is building of human nature. Bernard states when the man enters, “I

distinctively dislike the sense of his presence, cold, unassimilated, among us. I do not believe in separation...Also, I wish to add to my collection of valuable observations upon the true nature of human life” (67). Thus Bernard decides to “furbish him up and make him concrete” by narrating a character-sketch that explicates the man’s appearance, history, job, and even his relations with his wife – a story that consists of a mixture of physical observations and personal information deduced from them. Emplotting his story, Bernard bestows on the man an occupation and class status, pronouncing him “a small builder who employs a few men. In local society he is important; is already a councilor, and perhaps in time will be mayor” (68). He also provides the man with a marital history, and a name proper to the identity he has given him, stating, “Walter J. Trumble is the sort of name that would fit him” (68).

Having created this sketch, however, Bernard’s storytelling is abruptly cut short as he discovers he has lost his ticket and is subsequently kicked off the train. In one of the most recent critical works examining orality in *The Waves*, Tony Jackson sees Bernard’s failure to finish his story in this instance as part of a larger pattern of opposing storytelling aesthetics that structures both Woolf’s text and the novel as a genre. He grounds this pattern in what he posits as differences between the oral and the written. Jackson argues that oral stories must possess a quality of “story-worthiness,” a point of conflict or a fantastical event, in order to make them interesting and memorable for listeners. Mired with intense attention to physical details – the kind of attention that Jackson sees as enabled by and characteristic of written texts – Bernard’s character-sketch of Trumble lacks the necessary “story-worthiness” to justify its existence as an oral story. In other words, Bernard cannot



finish his story, in this instance as well as many others, because he is trying to tell orally the type of story that can only be written (Jackson, *Technology* 129-132).

Jackson's argument is valuable insofar as it draws attention to Bernard's habit of providing overabundant physical descriptions during his stories. However, paying attention to the actual scene of storytelling within the text leads in a different direction. First of all, it is important to note that this scene offers one of those moments in *The Waves* in which the non-mimetic nature of character interactions and of oral storytelling in particular is acutely felt. Bernard has not been narrating his character-sketch of Trumble out loud. If he had been, we could suppose Trumble would have given his actual name. Neville, however, is somehow aware that Bernard has created a story for this man, whom he believes to be a horse breeder or a plumber.<sup>69</sup> As an audience member in this unnatural storytelling scene, he offers a particularly insightful critique of Bernard as a storyteller. This critique identifies Bernard's character-sketch of Trumble as deficient not because it lacks "story-worthiness,"<sup>70</sup> but because it fails to adequately encompass and convey a deeper sense of Trumble as an individual. In other words, it is a failure of character-narration. Neville wonders: "But what did Bernard feel for the plumber? Did he not only wish to continue the sequence of the story which he never stops telling himself?"

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<sup>69</sup> In Bernard's story, the man is a builder, yet it is evident that Bernard and Neville are talking about the same individual since they are sitting in the same compartment and both refer to the person with a watch chain with coral ornaments. This difference between Bernard's claim that the man is a builder, who may someday be mayor, and Neville's claim that the man is a plumber is significant, given that it is a difference of class as well as occupation. Thus Neville's claim calls into question not only Bernard's storytelling, but his powers of observation and interpretation – that is his "reading" abilities – as well. Indeed, in this scene, as seems to be a somewhat typical pairing between Bernard and Neville within the text, while Bernard attempts to "read" another individual through the creation of a character-sketch, Neville has been attempting to read a book.

<sup>70</sup> It is also worth mentioning that the notion of "story-worthiness" itself is a rather problematic concept in relation to Woolf, as much of her work challenges conventional ideas of what is considered "story-worthy" and exposes the patriarchal ideologies that undergirded "story-worthy" plots. In *A Room of One's Own*, for example, Woolf considers how stories of lesbian love (that "Chloe liked Olivia") have historically been excluded from literature.

(69). Recalling an earlier description of Bernard's childhood story-making ("Bernard moulds his bread into pellets and calls them 'people'") Neville invokes the idea that in the process of making people concrete through story, Bernard fails to understand who they truly are (25). As Neville states:

He began it [his story] when he rolled his bread into pellets as a child.  
One pellet was a man, one was a woman. We are all pellets. We are all  
phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook  
under A or B. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding,  
except of what we most feel. (69-70)

Neville resists Bernard's use of fact and phrases to integrate individuals into his ongoing story, because such facts and phrases inevitably fail to encompass the complexity of individual existence. For all his storytelling, Bernard at times lacks understanding of the true nature of the individuals whose stories he tells, even when those individuals are his closest friends. He cannot recognize or empathize with their innermost struggles and desires.

Isolated by his intellectual elitism as well as his passion for Percival, Neville is particularly aware of this flaw in Bernard, both as a storyteller and as a friend. At times, this awareness prevents him from sharing his feelings with Bernard out of fear that his deepest emotions would only be translated into another superficial story. Indeed, this is exactly what happens on the day that Neville shares his poems with Bernard at university. Seeing that Neville wishes to share something intimately personal, Bernard spins the story of Neville the tragic poet-lover: "Let me then create you...you wish to be a poet; and you wish to be a lover. But the splendid clarity of

your intelligence, and the remorseless honesty of your intellect...bring you to a halt” (85). While Bernard is correct on some level (Neville has, after all, written a poem and is in love), Bernard’s act of ‘creating’ Neville fails to capture the full emotional torment Neville feels over his sexuality – over, as he says, “whether I am doomed always to cause repulsion in those I love” (88). Bernard’s failure of understanding here makes Neville’s later judgment of him seem entirely justified: “He [Bernard] half knows everybody; he knows nobody” (121).

This criticism of Bernard and his stories echoes Woolf’s own position concerning what she sees as one of the failures of Edwardian narrative. According to Woolf in her essay “Modern Fiction,” Edwardian writers are “materialists” who fail to convey the true essence of human nature because they attempt to develop ‘character’ through a convention that centers upon the description of material facts. They disappoint “because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (“Modern” 147). By defining characters through a supposedly “realistic” representation of their material situation, and by following the “tyranny” of narrative convention – the demand “to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability” – Edwardian writers neglect to convey the truth of what life is really like (149). Ironically, Edwardian realism fails miserably at encapsulating reality.

Similarly, in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf claims that Edwardians lay “an enormous stress on the fabric of things” at the expense of ignoring the essence of the human condition (“Mr. Bennett” 106). While offering an explicit critique of the Edwardians and their method for portraying character, this essay also implicitly

demonstrates Woolf's view of the interconnected nature of matters of formal aesthetics and issues of social structure and ideology. Woolf begins this essay by asserting that a degree of storytelling ability, and arguably a degree of emplotment, is necessary for survival. The novelist's impulse for what Woolf calls, taking the term from Arnold Bennett, "character-creating" is comparable to the everyday individual's knack for "character-reading," insofar as both engage the imagination in connecting with another individual by judging how he or she fits into the realm of one's own understanding (90-93).<sup>71</sup> Woolf sees the novelist's impulse to create character as an amplification of this fundamental human instinct, one that she herself shares. She illustrates this point by describing her own encounter with an elderly lady on a train from Richmond to Waterloo, who she creates a brief character-sketch of and dubs Mrs. Brown. Small, poor, and harried, but also exuding a sense of pride and respectability, Woolf frames Mrs. Brown as a tragic and heroic figure – possibly a widow but most definitely alone and without resources – describing her as "one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness...suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt" (93). Mrs. Brown has somehow fallen under the power of her imposing companion, a middle-aged businessman who Woolf names Mr. Smith.

What Woolf objects to is the specific storytelling patterns employed by Edwardian novelists. She presents her objections as a kind of period argument. The fault of the Edwardians is that that they read and emplot characters according to

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<sup>71</sup> This kind of connection between the acts of reading and storytelling is a point that Woolf also explores in her essay "How Should One Read a Book?" (1926/32), a point we shall return to shortly in the second section of this chapter. For our purposes now, however, it is important to note that Woolf poses this ability for "character-creating"/"character-reading" as a fundamental skill that enables individuals to function among others on a daily basis: "Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our businesses largely depend on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help" (Woolf, "Mr. Bennett" 91). To this degree, a certain amount of what could be called emplotting seems required, as individuals depend on specific social signals and conventions to determine how they should interact with others.

particular conventions – specifically those inherited from Victorian realism – that cannot communicate character within a modern context. Woolf illustrates her point with a scene that prefigures Bernard narrating the story of the man on the train. She places her group of Edwardian novelists – H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett – in a train car with her Mrs. Brown, and she describes how they would write Mrs. Brown’s story, each emplotting her according to his own fashion. Wells would look past Mrs. Brown to project a Utopian future in which sad, poor, uneducated women like her no longer exist; Galsworthy would look past her to see and expound upon the social conditions that caused her plight. Bennett would present, at least on the surface, the illusion of seeing Mrs. Brown, as he would describe her physical appearance and personal history using copious detail. Yet, for “all his power of observation,” like Wells and Galsworthy, “Mr. Bennett never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner” (103). Adhering to conventions that focus on current or potential social conditions and on the minutiae of physical detail and personal history, these writers hardly seem concerned with portraying Mrs. Brown, and by extension, human nature, at all – a fact that leads to the idea that it’s not just the conventions themselves that are at fault, but the entire approach to novel-writing that underlies them. Woolf states her own position clearly that the purpose of the novel “is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire” (97). Her description of Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett, however, shows them as more interested in Utopias, social commentary, and “the decoration and upholstery of the carriage” than in expressing Mrs. Brown’s character (104). For this reason, Woolf encourages modern novelists to reject both the conventions and the

approach, or as she terms it, the “business,” of the Edwardians. As she states, “those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (104).

Following Woolf’s own attempt to narrate Mrs. Brown’s story, the Edwardians’ neglect of Mrs. Brown takes on social, and even potentially ethical, implications. Woolf’s description of the Edwardians and their treatment of Mrs. Brown affiliates them with Mr. Smith, the “man of business” traveling with Mrs. Brown (94). While Mrs. Brown’s small stature and quiet demeanor inspires in Woolf a sense of her as a sympathetic, potentially victimized individual, Mr. Smith is domineering, voluble, and wholly unsympathetic. Their descriptions make obvious a clear difference in class and, in turn, in power. Woolf conveys the sense that Mr. Smith is bullying Mrs. Brown for some unknown reason, using Mrs. Brown with no concern for her obvious grief. While Mrs. Brown suffers intensely, Mr. Smith speaks loquaciously and in great detail about insects and fruit farms, talking louder in annoyance as she softly begins to cry. Eventually, he ignores her completely and stares out the window – actions which parallel those of the Edwardian authors who write a great deal but refuse to see Mrs. Brown. In the end, Woolf’s essay conveys a sense that both Mr. Smith and the Edwardians merely use Mrs. Brown for their own devices, neglecting her essence and interests for their own, a neglect authorized by their superior social positions and power.

It is clear that Woolf places Bernard in a similar position, and that the criticism Neville levels at Bernard echoes Woolf’s own critique of Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett. More concerned with fitting those he encounters into his

own life-narrative – or as Neville phrases it, “the sequence of the story which he never stops telling himself” – Bernard fails to understand who his “characters,” and his friends, truly are (*Waves* 25). However, Woolf grants Bernard a redeeming quality that she does not find in the Edwardians: Bernard occasionally experiences moments of clarity during which he becomes acutely aware of the inadequacy of his stories. Neville’s protests on the train are not so different from Bernard’s own later doubt, embedded tensely within one of his stories. During the farewell dinner for Percival, Bernard engages in his typical activity of observing other diners at the restaurant and creating stories about them. At one point, however, he stops and wonders:

Who and what are these unknown people? I ask. I could make a dozen stories of what he said, of what she said – I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories?...sometimes I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story? What is Rhoda’s? What is Neville’s? (144)

Considering this question, Bernard states that “[t]here are facts,” such as his own appearance and his own visible actions, and he delivers a self-conscious description of himself hailing the waiter and paying the bill as an example (144). Yet, finishing this description, he concludes, “That is truth; that is the fact, but beyond it is all darkness and conjecture” (145).

In such moments, Bernard inhabits a position closer to the one Woolf herself inhabits in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” For, while Woolf, like the Edwardians, emplots Mrs. Brown for her own ends of critiquing Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett, she ultimately distinguishes herself from them by admitting that her own portrayal of Mrs. Brown is wholly inadequate. She explains that, given the tools she currently has

at her disposal, she expects that Mrs. Brown will continue to elude her. By consciously drawing attention to the inadequacy of her own character-sketch, Woolf cedes the singular and, in Woolf's framing, oppressive authority claimed by Edwardian realists, shifting the locus of her own authority to a kind of Marlow-esque, self-conscious recognition of the limitations of her ability to comprehensively represent the essence of Mrs. Brown.

In *The Waves*, instances of resistance to Bernard's plotting of character in relation to the physical world, both as they are voiced by Bernard's friends and by Bernard himself, spotlight Woolf's own presentation of character and materiality in this particular text. In contradistinction to Woolf's description of the methods of the Edwardians, Woolf does not provide her characters with lengthy personal histories, nor does she provide more than a few remarks about their personal appearance. Facts and descriptions are delivered in passing during the characters' soliloquies, but the narrative focuses not on the characters' external actions or appearance but on their internal states. Moreover, while readers may have access to the workings of Woolf's characters' minds as they perceive the world and interact with each other, less time is spent performing the kind of in depth emotional analysis that Woolf associates with the modern novel in "On Not Knowing Greek" – reflectively seeking out motivations or building a sense of an utterly unique individual.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, and this is a point we will delve into further in the second part of this chapter, Woolf's characters in *The Waves* in many ways resemble her description of characters from Greek drama in this

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<sup>72</sup> It should be noted here that the particular modern novelist that Woolf mentions in connection to this kind of "psychologizing" is Marcel Proust, an author Woolf respected whom she certainly did not group with the Edwardians. However, I mention Woolf's description of how modern novelists spend time delving into the psychology of their characters because I think it provides further support for the idea that Woolf is clearly attempting something different in her presentation of characters in *The Waves*.



essay, as Woolf claims that Greek dramatists often present characters in broad outlines. As critics have commented since the text's publication, the six characters of *The Waves* come across more as 'types' than as complex personalities, as each possesses a set of general traits setting him or her apart from the others.<sup>73</sup> This idea is in line with Woolf's vision of her characters, recorded in her diary in April 1930: "What I now think (about the Waves) is that I can give in a very few strokes the essentials of a person's character. It should be done boldly, almost as caricature" (Woolf, *Diary Three* 300).

How does Woolf's presentation of characters in *The Waves* as "types" connect with or reconcile her critique of the Edwardians and Neville's critique of Bernard? Certainly, at first blush there is something of a contradiction in the idea that "caricature" would be an ideal method for providing a penetrating portrait of human nature. However, I find Woolf's choice of the word "caricature" particularly illuminating in terms of thinking about both her method of character-building in *The Waves*. "Caricature" is a technique that hovers between "representation" and "misrepresentation." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "caricature" as a "[g]rotesque or ludicrous representation of persons or things by exaggerating their most characteristic and striking features" and as "an exaggerated or debased likeness"

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<sup>73</sup> For contemporary reviews discussing Woolf's characters as general types, see Harold Nicholson's review in the October 8, 1931, edition of *Action* and Louis Kronenberger's review in the October 25, 1931, edition of the *New York Times Book Review* (Majumdar 226, 273-275). For an example of a later scholarly work that picks up on this notion, see Daniel Ferrer's *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language* (1990).

(“caricature, n.”).<sup>74</sup> In other words, it is a representation that misrepresents, and does so in a fashion that both amuses and disturbs.

Certainly, a good number of the few physical descriptions we find of characters could be characterized as “caricature” in this fashion. Take, for example, Jinny’s self-description, alongside her description of Susan: “my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together; I show my gums too much when I laugh. Susan’s head, with its fell look, with its grass-green eyes which poets will love, Bernard said, because they fall upon close white stitching, put mine out” (Woolf, *Waves* 41). Similarly, Louis describes himself: “this unenviable body – my large nose, my thin lips, my colonial accent” (52-53). Focused on a few key features, these descriptions give the impression of certain aspects of appearance being out-of-proportion with the rest, including not just Jinny’s close-set eyes and Louis large nose, but also Susan’s womanliness. Refusing to aim for mimesis, this kind of characterization innately contains a sense of itself as the performance of a (mis)representation. Woolf’s method of characterization in *The Waves* thus repeats, in a fashion, her strategy in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Using only “a very few stokes” to establish her characters, Woolf develops her six portraits of human nature while refusing the Edwardian claim to mimetic representation and the convention of developing character through minute attention to physical detail and material facts.

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<sup>74</sup> There is also a possible performative association underlying the term “caricature” through its connection to “burlesque.” “To burlesque” is one of the definitions offered by the *OED* for “caricature” when used as a verb (“caricature, v.”); and one of the definitions of “burlesque,” as a noun, is “that species of literary composition, or of dramatic representation, which aims at exciting laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects” (“burlesque adj. and n.”). We will discuss *The Waves* in terms of dramatic performance, and specifically Greek drama, in the next part of this chapter; however, based upon this connection between “caricature” and “burlesque,” another avenue worthy of exploration at another time might be to consider Woolf’s caricatures in *The Waves* in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque,” a literary mode that uses comic spectacle to undermine accepted, hegemonic social structures and discourses of a particular time and culture (see *Rabelais and His World* (1965)).

This is not to say that the material world is a matter of unimportance in relation to the development of character in *The Waves*. Rather materiality provides a basis of connection for readers and an alternative schema for emplotting character and, in turn, subjectivity. In an August 1930 letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf wrote, “I think that my difficulty is that [in *The Waves*] I am writing to a rhythm and not a plot...it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw the reader” (*Reflection* 204). Susan Dick points out that those material facts that Woolf does provide concerning her characters, such as their ages, act as “ropes” within the text, extending readers with necessary connections to the novel (Dick, “Literary” 66-68). However, material facts also act as “ropes” in another, perhaps more fundamental sense: they serve both to structure the rhythm of the text and to tie it together. James Phelan has detected a pattern within the narrative of *The Waves* that oscillates between the narration of external facts and action that place the characters within a scene and moments of “lyric revelation” in which a deeper meaning unfolds (Phelan, “Character” 415-416). In the most intense episodes, instances of revelation gesture towards a state of awareness that is detached from individual identity and time.

Neville experiences one such instance when, while climbing a staircase as a child, he hears of a man who committed suicide. Recollecting this moment, Neville states:

I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter.  
His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead  
codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, ‘death among the apple

trees,' forever...The ripple of my life was unavailing. I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. 'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,' I said. And the others passed on. (Woolf, *Waves* 24)

In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf calls such instants of intense revelation "moments of being," a title that Woolf actually considered for *The Waves* ("Sketch" 70; Dick, "Literary" 69).<sup>75</sup> Woolf describes these "moments of being" as instances of intense consciousness during which she is completely immersed in an experience or sensation that contains an element of truth or reality that is not at the time articulable. These moments are inextricably tied to the material world, as they take place against the background of or are often inspired by a physical event or object, such as a flower. Yet they also transcend the immediate, physical present as they offer "a token of some real thing behind appearances" (Woolf, "Sketch" 70-72). Writing of these moments years later, Woolf claims that when she recalls them, they are more real than the present (67).

The physical setting of Neville climbing the stairs serves as a background for his moment of revelation, connecting the material world to the deeper movements of the mind. Moreover, this setting serves to tie this revelation with a similar incident that occurs later in the book, where Neville freezes on the stairs thinking of Percival's death. In this way, and against Bernard and the Edwardians' materialism, Woolf shows how the physical world and our experience of it ties together transcendent moments in a life and a life narrative. Material objects are both links to the physical present and portals to non-present realities. Woolf's new realism thus challenges the

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<sup>75</sup> As Dick notes, this episode itself closely resembles a personal experience Woolf recounts in "A Sketch of the Past" (Dick, "I" 39). See page 71 in "A Sketch of the Past."

traditional concept of the self as a singular entity moving along a linear timeline. She creates what Michel Serres terms “polychronic” temporality, where rather than running according to a flat linear sequence, time seems “gathered together,” like a napkin folded into “multiple pleats” (Serres 59-60). The employment of this kind of temporality suggests an alternative way of schematizing human experience and the very sense of being a self within the world – a kind of non-linear employment of character.

***“To what conclusion?”: Temporality and Endings***

Temporality itself is, in fact, another focal point around which resistance to Bernard’s storytelling develops, and the related issue of endings are loci of tension both in Bernard’s stories and Woolf’s own narrative. The stories that Bernard narrates, both to himself and to his friends, create distinctly linear sequences from out of the chaos of perceptions that constitute everyday life. As Bernard states while beginning to tell a story at school, “I must open the little trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another. I will tell you the story of the doctor” (Woolf, *Waves* 49). Even when describing his own experience of what Woolf would call “moments of being” – instances which are experienced as an immersive present rather than a conscious movement through time – Bernard recounts them within a linear sequence. When telling the story of his life to an unnamed listener during his final soliloquy (a clear natural oral storytelling moment), Bernard recalls instances when he felt outside of

his self and time: yet even these instances are recounted in a linear order. There is a 'before' leading up to them, and afterwards the story progresses on, returning again and again to versions of the refrain, "Something always has to be done next. Tuesday follows Monday; Wednesday Tuesday" (262).

Significantly, this repeated refrain of week days – "Tuesday follows Monday" – itself echoes another discussion of time and linear sequence within the novel with which Woolf was undoubtedly familiar – her good friend E. M. Forster's explanation of "story" and "plot" in the traditional English novel from *Aspects of the Novel* (1927).<sup>76</sup> In a similar way to how I have posited Bernard as a composite storytelling figure, both limited by his adherence to Edwardian conventions and at times capable of seeing their shortcomings, Woolf regarded Forster somewhat ambivalently when it came to literary innovation. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she categorizes him alongside D. H. Lawrence as a Georgian writer whose early work was ruined by his attempts to use the "tools" of the Edwardians rather than throwing them away ("Mr. Bennett" 107). In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster defines "story" as "a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence – dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on" (Forster, *Aspects* 27). According to Forster, this arrangement of events into sequence, of "supposing that Monday is followed by Tuesday," is the fundamental aspect of the traditional novel, "without which it could not exist" (29, 26).

However, following Forster's further formulation of "plot," the linear sequence Bernard narrates of daily life (of Monday and Tuesday) is more than just

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<sup>76</sup> *Aspects of the Novel* was originally delivered by Forster as a series of lectures at Trinity University in 1927. They were collected and published that same year.

what Forster calls “story,” more than just one event happening after another. Rather, Bernard invests the sequence of events with meaningful causal relations, that is, with plot (86). Bernard recalls his daily life, stating that he “clapped” his hat on his head and “strode into a world inhabited by vast numbers of men who had also clapped their hats on their heads, and as we jostled and encountered in trains and tubes we exchanged the knowing wink of competitors and comrades braced with a thousand snares and dodges to achieve the same end – to earn our livings” (Woolf, *Waves* 261). Bernard thus emplots his career as a kind of grandiose adventure in a world of chivalrous capitalism. The daily actions of living are a sequence engaged in for a specific purpose. Mimicking the formulation of “story” and “plot” from Forster’s traditional novel, Bernard perceives his life as a series of events occurring along a linear timeline, and through his storytelling he makes this sequence meaningful within a particular ideological framework.

In contrast to Bernard’s impulse to identify sequence, Neville yearns to live by “the unlimited time of the mind” (273). He longs to immerse himself in the present and so to experience the full force of “moments of being.” Neville asks, “In a world which contains the present moment...why discriminate? Nothing should be named lest by doing so we change it. Let it exist, this bank, this beauty, and I for one instant, steeped in pleasure” (81). Bernard’s plotting of life’s sequences naturally opposes Neville’s impulse for things to remain unnamed and therefore unchanged. For instance, when the two boys are in school together, Bernard disrupts Neville’s attempt to immerse himself in the present, sitting on the grass with Percival, by telling stories. As Neville describes the scene:

It seems as if the whole world were flowing and curving – on the earth the trees, in the sky the clouds... The clouds lose tufts of whiteness as the breeze dishevels them. If that blue could stay for ever; if that hole could remain for ever; if this moment could stay for ever –

But Bernard goes on talking (38)

Bernard's talking forces Neville back within the sequence of time, and causes him to lose this moment of communion.

Yet although Bernard narrates these sequences, these stories, into plots, he also experiences moments of doubt where he is unable to maintain meaningful causal connections and becomes aware that his ordering of life is only imposing an "arbitrary design" (188). One such instance occurs while Bernard is in Rome. Thinking back over his life, he organizes it in terms of stages and yet begins to question this kind of sequencing: "let me consider. The drop falls; another stage has been reached. Stage upon stage. And why should there be an end to stages? And where to do they lead?" (186-187). Acknowledging all the varied impressions and experiences that distract his process of organizing life into a coherent story, he questions, "Are there stories?" (187). Recounting the story of his life during his final monologue, Bernard expresses similar doubts. As if admitting that sequence is an illusion, he asks the indulgence of his listener, stating, "Let us *pretend* that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that one matter is dispatched – love for instance – we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next" (251 emphasis mine). Later he breaks from the progression of his story again: "But it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie" (255). The realization that the



sequences he creates are an illusion ultimately leads Bernard to question whether beginnings and endings, as limits of story and of life itself, exist. He muses, “But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it” (267).

This opposition between traditional narrative and experimental temporality constitutes one of the fundamental tensions underlying *The Waves*. From one perspective, linear time and causality might be said to be a basic component of story, whether written or told orally. Forster argues the linear drive of story within the traditional English novel as having roots in older, pre-modern oral storytelling traditions (Forster, *Aspects* 26-27). From early on, however, Woolf envisioned her text as challenging the conventional idea of narrative time and sequence. Indeed, “Modern Fiction” already shows Woolf railing against the tyrannies of linear time in fiction: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo” (Woolf, “Modern” 150). The actual experience of life does not fall into the neat sequence of linear time and causal relations that traditional plot ascribes to it. Thus, Woolf encourages modern novelists to reject these conventions, and to record experience as the mind truly perceives it. Bernard’s practice of storytelling aligns him with the Edwardian authors who Woolf attacks in her criticism, yet in respect to the experience of the “luminous halo” of life, Woolf again grants Bernard an understanding that she does not ascribe to the Edwardians. Although Bernard’s storytelling impulse leads him to create plots, he still experiences “moments of being” that transcend time, and he recognizes the inadequacy of his stories for conveying these moments.

Putting her earlier challenge against Edwardian conventions into practice, Woolf consciously envisioned *The Waves* as doing something radical with time and her representation of it. Recording some early thoughts on *The Waves* in 1926, Woolf wrote, “Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic and very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated...My theory being that the actual event does not exist – nor time either” (*Diary Three* 118). Years later, in 1929, she makes the similar statement that in this new book she will “do away with exact time and place”; yet at the same time, she considers that “One must get the sense that this is the beginning; this the middle; that the climax (229). Herein lies a contradiction that is ultimately the source of tension within *The Waves*’ completed narrative. Paradoxically, Woolf sets out to create a work that will convey the experience of consciousness, which is itself not time bound, within the structure of story that is bound by the temporal landmarks of beginning, middle, and end. She faces the dilemma of maintaining the structure of story while simultaneously conveying the experience of unstructured time.

This tension plays out in *The Waves* both through the depiction of instances of resistance to Bernard’s stories and in the way that time works within the narrative’s actual structure, for Woolf’s text invokes multiple kinds of temporality, often simultaneously. On one level, the interludes and soliloquies follow a linear time sequence, as the interludes trace the progression of a day from sunrise to sunset and the soliloquies follow the lives of the characters from childhood to old age and death. At the same time, however, both of these trajectories are also cyclical in nature, as the pattern of day and night, birth and death repeat. The text itself presents a cyclical

movement between the interludes and the soliloquies, and numerous critics have argued that the soliloquies themselves have a cyclical, wave-like structure. Moore sees this wave-like motion as one that oscillates between individual and communal identity, and Phelan, as I noted earlier, identifies a pattern that cycles between narrative progression and lyrical moments of revelation (Moore 219; Phelan, "Character" 415-416). Woolf's depiction of character's experiencing "moments of being" introduces another experience of time, one that is completely immersive in the present.

The kind of polychronic folding of time that occurs when various "moments of being" tie together disparate parts of the text, such as the scenes of Neville on the stairs which we discussed earlier, could be said to introduce yet another temporal formulation, one that collapses time altogether. This temporal collapsing occurs not only during the characters' soliloquies, but also during the interludes. For instance, the cycle of the seasons presented in the interludes do not always proceed in the correct order. On some occasions, a single interlude situates itself in two different seasons. As Dick points out, in the interlude preceding Bernard's final monologue, rotten apples suggest winter, while the elm trees also bloom "*in full summer foliage*" (Woolf, *Waves* 237; qtd. Dick, "Literary" 67). Moreover, while the interludes together trace the progression of a single day from sunrise to sunset, they include references both to contemporary objects, like trains and steamers, and descriptions of other objects invoke earlier times, such as the "*shaggy carts that came up from the meadows short legged and primeval looking*" (Woolf, *Waves* 183). Such contradictions of season and historical time transform and collapse this single day

into any day or all days. Thus it seems that Woolf's narrative is structured not only by linear and cyclical time, but is also inclusive of all time, unlimited by a sense of sequence, a kind of eternal 'now.'

The tension between these conflicting concepts of time culminates at the end of the last soliloquy, concluding the text on a note that complicates its closure. The issue of how Woolf ends *The Waves* is particularly significant given that the concept of "endings," specifically the endings of stories, has been a source of anxiety throughout. Not only does Bernard directly question the possibility of endings – asking, "And why should there be an end to stages? And where do they lead? To what conclusion?" – but Neville also displays dismay at Bernard's inability to complete his tales (186-187). Having listened to Bernard's story fade in front of Percival's indifference, Neville remarks, "Yes, the appalling moment has come when Bernard's power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent...Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then – our friends are not able to finish their stories" (39). This anxiety concerning endings punctuates *The Waves*' larger question concerning its overall narrative structure: How does one end a story that is supposed to convey a deeper reality not limited by notions of time?

On one level, Bernard's charge towards death provides an ending so final that it is beyond ambiguity. The tension between his desire to convey experience through narrative and the resistance to this desire conclusively ends when his experience ends, moving into that realm which fundamentally cannot be narrated. Rosemary Sumner contends that Woolf is playing with what Sumner calls a modernist "trickling away"

ending, a kind of anti-climax, by having Bernard question: “Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sign? a last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water to some gutter, where, burbling, it dies away” (qtd. Sumner 16). Such an ending, it should be noted, mirrors the scene that Neville finds so “appalling” in the schoolyard. Ultimately, Sumner argues that Woolf cannot yet envision such a “modern” ending, and so she opts to end with a traditional, heroic last stand, as Bernard re-embraces the power of story and envisions himself riding to meet death, exultantly crying “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (qtd. 17). Thus according to Sumner, “Woolf has combined her as yet underdeveloped, modernist (trickling away) ending and the strong, assertive, finite ending of the traditional novel” (17).

However, the issue of closure is not so easily resolved. Dick argues that Bernard neither abandons nor is abandoned by language. Rather like a character out of a Beckett story or play Bernard fully embraces the illusion of words and story, despite recognizing their falseness (Dick, “I” 50). However, if Bernard is embracing an illusion in his ride against Death, it is important to remember that his “death,” insofar as it is an ending to the linear concept of existence, is merely part of that illusion. The novel’s last, italicized sentence, “*The waves broke on the shore,*” could be, as Ira Klitgård suggests, a final interlude, a continuance of the cycle between interlude and monologue leaving the reader with the hope that the cycle restarts and the “waves keep rolling on as always” (Klitgård 13). Indeed, preparing to ride against Death, Bernard states, “Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (Woolf, *Waves* 297). In addition, if you juxtapose the last line (of the waves breaking) with the first interlude’s description of waves “*moving, one after*

*another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually,*” gives one the sense that the novel’s end and not just the internal structure are cyclical (7).

And yet as much as the narrative structure of *The Waves* resembles the rise and fall, the surge and the undertow, of waves, following a pattern between moments of individuality and community, daily life and spiritual transcendence, soliloquies and interludes, it also resembles a ring, an image that appears repeatedly throughout the book. In the first sentence of the first soliloquy a very young Bernard describes the sun, which we know from the preceding interlude is just beginning to rise: “I see a ring...hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light” (9). Bernard also uses words to create smoke rings that encircle people in the realm of understanding. His stories are “Toys [he] twist[s], bubbles [he] blow[s], one ring passing through another” (144). Louis, with his fascist-like desire for rigidity and order, wants to fashion his poetry and his world into steel rings. Rhoda is also obsessed with round structures, such as clocks and the loops of curvilinear mathematical figures (G. Stewart, *Reading* 266-267). Finally, rings are more generally associated with the mind and the growth of identity, as Bernard repeats in his final interlude variations of another refrain: “The mind grows rings; identity becomes robust” (Woolf, *Waves* 257). A ring is at once circular and, if one travels around its circumference, linear, yet at the same time it is self-contained, accommodating the various concepts of time apparent in the text. And, of course, when a wave, or a ripple, first sets out it, spreads in all directions, a ring growing, moving outward in a perpetual cycle, meeting the resistance of the still water it crosses, until, like identity, it merges back with the

greater body of water or breaks upon the shore. Thus, the cyclical pattern of *The Waves*, in which no repetition is exactly the same, reveals the narrative shaped like many rings, each following the other, connected and at points folded together to form an endless spiral. In this way, Woolf's experimental text engages multiple notions of how time is experienced.

### **Orality, Writing, and Remediation: Reading *The Waves***

Arguably, another locus of resistance to Bernard's storytelling impulse centers upon the act of writing. As mentioned earlier, Bernard thinks of himself as a novelist, yet his reputation as a skilled storyteller is based solely upon his oral performances. In fact, not only does Bernard never write his intended novel, but beyond the brief phrases he jots occasionally in his notebook, we almost never see him writing (or, for that matter, reading a printed text).<sup>77</sup> The lone exception to this statement is the scene during which he attempts to write a letter to a young woman he is infatuated with while at university, an attempt that ends in frustration and failure. As Bernard describes, "[...]it falls flat. It peters out. My true self breaks off from the assumed" (Woolf, *Waves* 79). As he then tries, and fails, to narrate a tale in which he meets his young woman and her father, Bernard connects his inability to complete either story to his lack of an immediate audience – "The truth is I need the stimulus of other people. Alone, over my dead fire, I tend to see the thin places in my own stories"

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<sup>77</sup> Critics like Molly Hite and Jane Marcus have hypothesized that Bernard's failure to produce this novel indicates that Bernard's character was based on that of Desmond MacCarthy (Hite, "Introduction" xlx; Marcus, *Hearts* 61). A friend of Woolf's and member of the Bloomsbury Group, MacCarthy was much admired for his ability to tell stories. Like Bernard, he had plans for a novel that never materialized. In a BBC broadcast *Talk on Desmond MacCarthy*, E. M. Forster describes MacCarthy's storytelling skills as well as efforts made by the Bloomsbury Group to help MacCarthy write his novel by forming a novel writing society (Forster "Talk"). While this parallel Bernard and MacCarthy may have some merit, the fact that Bernard never writes his novel also has interesting implications that gesture towards additional tensions within Woolf's experimental narrative.

(80). This is, of course, not the only time Bernard expresses his desire for a physical audience for his stories; yet the pairing of this desire with a failed act of writing is significant. In a text that often seems to elide or obscure differences between the spoken and written word through its unnatural presentation of oral storytelling, this instance draws attention to a physically grounded difference between oral and written modes of communication, one that centers upon the notion of material presence.

This emphasis on the difference between the spoken and written word through Bernard's struggle with the latter is part of subtle foregrounding of the physicality of medium that suffuses *The Waves* both on the level of content and of structure. This foregrounding highlights the text's own status as a physical medium, and creates what might be called a "hypermediate" experience for readers. In the first chapter of this project, we briefly discussed Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concepts of "immediacy" and "hypermediacy," which they posit as two alternate but deeply interrelated logics of mediation. Media or works governed by the logic of immediacy strive for transparency; they aim to negate or erase their audience's awareness of the medium and to deliver direct access to the experience, object, or event represented. Those governed by the logic of hypermediacy are opaque; they highlight the presence of mediation, thereby emphasizing engagement with the medium itself as an immediate experience (Bolter 19).<sup>78</sup> Thus the logic of hypermediacy is at its core also driven by the desire for immediacy, that is, the direct experience of the medium at

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<sup>78</sup> At this point, it is perhaps necessary to clarify the difference between "hypermediacy" and "self-reflexivity." These two terms are interrelated and arguably overlap in some instances; however, they are not synonymous. Self-reflexive works draw attention to the conventions that govern them. Thus, according to Gerald Prince, a "self-reflexive narrative" is "[a] narrative taking itself and/or those narrative elements by which it is constituted and communicated... as a subject of reflection" (85). "Hypermediacy," on the other hand, draws attention to a work as a *medium*, as a physical object, and to the omnipresent and interconnected ways that such mediums shape our daily experience. Self-reflexivity can contribute to a sense of hypermediacy, as I will argue it does in *The Waves* at points when the text emphasizes its status as writing.



hand (34). The tension *The Waves* creates through its incorporation and juxtaposition of various kinds of media – both oral/aural and written – draws attention to Woolf’s text as medium, to the reader’s own encounter with this medium, and to the omnipresent and interconnected ways in which such media shape daily experience. It also reveals an even deeper contradiction that underlies *The Waves* and Woolf’s vision of what she wanted to accomplish. For while Woolf’s aim in *The Waves* is to authentically represent human experience of the world, what she ultimately produces is a text that draws attention to itself as a medium – to itself as an experience.

No examination of the function of orality in *The Waves* would be complete without accounting for the text’s overtly oral-mode of narration – the pattern of “X said...” that loops repeatedly throughout the soliloquies of Woolf’s six central characters. I see this oral mode as part of Woolf’s larger engagement with issues of medium and with potential connections between medium and audience, and ultimately medium and embodiment. In this section, I proceed by looking at three interconnected ways that Woolf engages these issues. To begin, I briefly examine some of the ways that *The Waves* incorporates oral/aural mediums, using her diaries, letters, essays, and other fiction alongside this primary text to demonstrate how oral mediums inflect the text’s very structure. I then turn to close readings of *The Waves* itself to demonstrate how the text highlights the processes of both inscription and reading/interpretation. Lastly, I will look at some specific scenes in which Woolf’s text seems to draw connections between physical media and the embodied identity of characters who encounter them. I will conclude by returning to the issue of the contradictory logics of immediacy and hypermediacy that underlie *The Waves*.

During this discussion, I will at points draw loosely on the methodology of Friedrich Kittler, who argues that the technology of a given culture constitutes the parameters through which individuals within that culture think and formulate a sense of embodied identity. I will also continue to draw on theoretical terminology provided by Bolter and Grusin, particularly their notion of “remediation,” a term which, at its most basic level, refers to “the representation of one medium in another” and is fundamentally connected to notions of immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter 45).<sup>79</sup> My aim here is not to align Woolf completely with these theorists, nor to make the claim that *The Waves* takes media as a central focus in the same way that a text like *Between the Acts* does, a subject I will comment on briefly at the end of this chapter. However, any conversation concerning the role of orality in *The Waves* would be incomplete without acknowledging the ways in which specific oral/aural media, both ancient and recently invented, inflect the text’s structure. Putting Woolf’s work into conversation with media theory offers significant insight into both Woolf’s text and scholarship concerning Woolf’s engagement with issues of the relation between language, consciousness, and the material world.<sup>80</sup> My reading here demonstrates Woolf’s growing sense of the significance of what might be called the materiality of

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<sup>79</sup> Bolter and Grusin use “remediation” as a highly flexible term, in part due to the fact that they are building from ideas first proposed by Marshall McLuhan. Like him, their definition of what constitutes a medium is also broad. A basic example of remediation would be something like a television show that begins with an image of a hand opening a book, thereby invoking the notion that the audience is viewing a story that is written down somewhere. The television itself, however, also offers another example of remediation, insofar as the physical form of its interface – the framed screen – invokes early media of painting and, arguably, the framed proscenium arch of the dramatic stage as well. While Bolter and Grusin focus primarily on visual and digital new media, they argue that all media are interconnected within a network in which they remediate and are remediated by each other.

<sup>80</sup> Interest in Woolf’s engagement with media and technology has steadily grown over the past decade or so. In this regard, Michele Pridmore-Brown’s 1998 *PMLA* article “1930-40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism” and the collection *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, published in 2000 and edited by Pamela L. Caughie, present important inaugural milestones. Melba Cuddy-Keane’s article from Caughie’s collection, “Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality,” which I cite below, offers some keen insight into connections between *The Waves* and the wireless radio, and is an important precursor to my own study.

language – the idea that language is always encountered in a particular physical form – as well as her awareness of and interest in how different media create a particular experience of the world.

It is a well-known fact that on several occasions during its composition Woolf wrote that she did not think of *The Waves* as a novel. In fact, she repeatedly said that it was not intended to be a novel. Several times in the months leading up to and following the completion of *Orlando* (1928), as *The Waves* percolated in the back of her mind and she began working on her book on fiction which would become *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf expressed doubts that she would ever write a “novel” again, although she had no plans to cease writing fiction. She recorded in her diary on February 18, 1928: “I doubt I shall ever write another novel after O[rlando]. I shall invent a new name for them” (Woolf, *Diary Three* 176). Exactly a month later, she expressed a similar idea: “I feel more & more sure that I will never write a novel again” (177). While in the process of composing *The Waves*, Woolf wrote on the back of one of the pages of her second draft: “The author would be glad if the following pages were read not as a novel” (Woolf, *Waves...Two* 582 verso).

Famously, one of the terms Woolf used while writing in her diary of *The Waves*, from her earliest conceptions of the work, was “play-poem.”<sup>81</sup> While planning and composing *The Waves*, Woolf often wrote in her diary and letters of having a

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<sup>81</sup> On June 18, 1927, Woolf recorded in her diary an early moment of inspiration for a book called *The Moths*, which would eventually come to be titled *The Waves*: “Slowly ideas began trickling in; & the suddenly I rhapsodized (the night L. [Leonard] dined with the apostles) & told over the story of the Moths... Now the moths will I think fill out the skeleton which I dashed here: the play-poem idea: the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night&c, all flowing together: interested by the arrival of bright moths” (Woolf, *Diary Three* 139). She uses the term “playpoem” again contemplating *The Moths* on November 7, 1928: “Yes, but The Moths? That was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem” (203).

sense that a poetic rhythm suffused the text.<sup>82</sup> However, one need not have access to Woolf's diaries in order to sense the poetic quality of *The Waves*' prose.

Contemporary reviews of *The Waves* demonstrate that from the very beginning readers recognized that Woolf had created a hybrid text of sorts. As an unnamed reviewer from the October 8, 1931 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* commented, "...the novel has turned into something very like poetry" (Majumdar 264). Academic literary critics interested in the formal experimentation of *The Waves* often focus on the idea that this text presents a mixing of literary genres, an approach that has held currency since at least the late 1970s.<sup>83</sup> While these kinds of analyses often offer valid insight into *The Waves*, their repeated focus on genre has left another significant kind of hybridity present in Woolf's text unexplored. In addition to thinking of *The Waves* as a mixing of genres, I propose that we can also think of this text as an experiment in the mixing of physical media.<sup>84</sup>

I contend that we can read *The Waves* as a written oral performance, one that invokes and structurally incorporates characteristics of several distinct types of performative oral/aural media. In this way, I see Woolf's text as a particularly

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<sup>82</sup> Woolf's above mentioned March 6, 1928 diary entry in which she states she feels more sure she "will never write a novel again" continues: "Little bits of rhyme come in" (177). On May 31 of that year she records her plans for *The Waves* as "Something abstract and poetic..." (185). There is also Woolf's letter to Ethel Smyth, mentioned earlier, in which she wrote of *The Waves* that she felt to be writing "to a rhythm and not to a plot" (Woolf, *Letters Four* 204).

<sup>83</sup> For an example of an earlier critical work that engages Woolf's work on these terms, see the final chapter of Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds* (1978). For more recent works with a focus on genre, see Justyna Kostkowaska's *Virginia Woolf's Experiment in Genre and Politics 1926-1931: Visioning and Versioning The Waves* (2005) and Molly Hite's "Introduction" to the 2006 Harcourt edition of Woolf's text.

<sup>84</sup> The distinction I am pushing for here has to do with keeping in mind the materiality of the elements being mixed. "Genre" itself is a notoriously slippery term, but when applied by those who consider *The Waves* a hybrid-genre text, it is most often used to designate different types of literature, specifically the novel, poetry, and drama. These critics thus consider the various textual characteristics and formal conventions that are associated with each of these literary genres. By shifting the focus to "medium," that is the physical means through which communication takes place, I hope to offer further insight into how Woolf's text engages issues of materiality and embodied identity.

interesting example of “remediation,” one that plays upon the difference between oral/aural and written modes of communication in order to create a particularly hypermediate kind of reading experience. Of course, to a certain extent, previous texts we have looked at, such as Conrad’s *Outcast* and Marlow-narratives and West’s *Harriet Hume*, are also examples of remediation that embed an oral medium within a written one, insofar as they incorporate written performances of oral storytelling. Yet *The Waves* differs insofar as it incorporates oral/aural media into its very structure, as its narrative *modus operandi*, and in such a way that their presence both highlights and is at odds with the text as writing. In the pages that follow, I look at how Woolf incorporates her understanding of both media that predate the novel, namely theater, and specifically Greek theater,<sup>85</sup> and the more recently invented communication technologies of the wireless and gramophone.<sup>86</sup>

Of the three, the influence of ancient Greek drama and radio are perhaps more obvious. The looping refrain of “X said...” that recurs throughout the soliloquies, of course, invokes oral performance generally, and the terms “soliloquy” and “interlude,” which Woolf herself used to designate the plain-typed sections of the text that “voice” the thoughts of the six characters and the italicized sections that describe

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<sup>85</sup> This issue of what constitutes a “medium” and whether oral performance should be considered included in this category has long been a matter of debate. In categorizing oral performance as a medium, I rely upon arguments such as those offered by Jan Georg Schneider in his article “Language and mediality: On the medial status of ‘everyday language’” (2006). Schneider argues that the misconception that the spoken word is not a medium stems in part from a larger “improper conceptual *opposition* of language and media,” where language is regarded as pure content and media the means of transport (Schneider 332, italics in original). Schneider argues that medium is a “phenomenon of performance,” inclusive of this performance’s constitutive parts (334).

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1878. The issue of who precisely invented the wireless is slightly more contested, but the exploration and development of wireless technology can be traced to the late nineteenth century. The first public wireless radio broadcasts in the United Kingdom occurred in 1920.

an un-peopled beach, bring the theater to mind.<sup>87</sup> Critics like Rowena Fowler have connected Woolf's text to ancient Greek drama specifically through Woolf's frequent use of the term "chorus," which appears throughout *The Waves* in various contexts that depict the mixing of voices or sounds, including the sounds of village life (Woolf, *Waves* 27), of young boys at public school (46), young men at university (91, 234), birds (73, 97), and all of these together with the soliloquies of the six characters (234). As Fowler points out, in a number of these instances, such as the "boasting boys" at school and the young men at university, not only voices but bodies come together to move in unison – "all turning their heads the same way" or "act[ing] like one man" – further invoking the Greek chorus (234, 91; Fowler 232). As mentioned earlier, I also see the influence of Greek drama in Woolf's heavy deployment of aural as well as visual imagery and in her depiction of her characters as broad "types," a topic we touched upon earlier.

Woolf identifies the appeal to multiple senses and general, almost stock characters as qualities of Greek drama in "On Not Knowing Greek" (1925). Interestingly, in this essay Woolf attributes these qualities to the physical conditions in which Greek audiences encountered plays, introducing the possibility that Woolf intended to engage her reading audience in a different way than she typically associated with the modern novel. According to Woolf, the audience's experience of Greek drama (at least as Woolf imaginatively envisions it – for as Woolf repeatedly points out, the modern individual can never really "know" the experience of the

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<sup>87</sup> See January 26, 1930 and November 12, 1930 (Woolf, *Diary Three* 285, 332). Woolf also often spoke of *The Waves* in her diary as consisting of various "scenes," another choice of word that possibly indicates her vision of this work as a kind of performance (see September 4, 1927 (153-154); May 28, 1929 (229); December 22, 1930 (339); and December 30, 1930 (343).) Woolf also mentions that one of her revision methods is to read the text aloud (March 28, 1930 (298)).

Greeks) would take place outdoors, in the open air, among a large crowd of fellow spectators. Sitting in close contact with many other people, Greek audience members would have an acute sense of their own bodies, their own need for movement, and potential distraction. In contrast, readers of the modern novel can be expected to read in solitude, with little distraction. They are not as immediately aware of their bodies, and can be expected to read closely and slowly and possibly even to reread particular lines. For this reason, modern novelists, like Proust, can spend pages upon pages describing the inner workings of the mind of a single character, making him or her utterly unique. Greek drama, on the other hand, must engage its audience's senses and cannot spend time plumbing the depths of individual psychology. As Woolf explains, "The [Greek] poet, therefore, had to bethink him, not of some theme which could be read for hours by people in privacy, but of something emphatic, familiar, brief, that would carry, instantly and directly, to an audience of seventeen thousand people perhaps, with ears and eyes eager and attentive, with bodies whose muscles would grow stiff if that sat too long without diversion" (Woolf, "On" 25). Woolf's use of aural imagery and broad characters thus demonstrates her attempt to think of her audience as itself embodied, or, rather, composed of embodied individuals, and to shift the nature of their encounter with her text.

In addition to the medium of ancient Greek drama, *The Waves* also incorporates more recently invented mechanically produced media of oral/aural performance. While each of the characters may be voiced through the enunciation of the "X said..." refrain, the absence of material context for this enunciation invokes a kind of disembodied oral performance, of the type that might be encountered listening

to a radio play or presentation, a medium that by 1931 Woolf was intimately familiar with. Various members of the Bloomsbury group, including Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, Desmond MacCarthy, Roger Fry, Maynard Keynes, Vita Sackville-West, and Harold Nicholson, avidly participated in BBC radio broadcasts during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>88</sup> Woolf herself would participate in her own radio broadcasts both before and after *The Waves* was published, but ample evidence from her diaries and letters attests to the fact that she often listened to the wireless.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the influence of radio as a medium, either consciously or unconsciously, as Woolf wrote *The Waves* might be inferred from how quickly and enthusiastically Woolf agreed to the production of a radio adaption of the text after its publication. The suggestion, made by Woolf's cousin, actress Virginia Isham, was never seen through to fruition, but Woolf was extremely receptive of the idea and even implied in her diary that it was partly her own.<sup>90</sup> Cuddy-Keane argues, and I agree, that this incident demonstrates that Woolf clearly thought of her "novel of voices," as Woolf referred to *The Waves*, as an aural as well as a written work (qtd. Cuddy-Keane 87; 87-88).

While the disembodied nature of the performative voice that enunciates the soliloquies may bring to mind the aural/oral medium of the radio, evidence speaks even more strongly for the influence of another popular and relatively new communication technology – the gramophone. Woolf mentions several times in her

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<sup>88</sup> For thorough recountings of Bloomsbury's activities on the radio, see Kate Whitehead's "Broadcasting Bloomsbury" (1990) and Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (2006).

<sup>89</sup> Woolf broadcast a piece about Beau Brummell on the BBC on November 20, 1929 (referenced in her diary on November 25, 1929 (267).) Woolf also recorded in her diary listening to the events of the 1926 General Strike over the wireless (see diary entries for May 5, 1926 (*Diary Three* 77); May 7, 1926 (80); May 9, 1926 (80-81); May 12, 1926 (84-85).)

<sup>90</sup> See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume 4, page 140. This incident is also mentioned in Woolf's letters to Isham (see *The Sick Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V, 1932-1935*, pages 145 and 149.)



diary listening to Beethoven on the gramophone while composing *The Waves*, a fact that has led critics like Gerald Levin and Elicia Clements to investigate the influence of music, and of Beethoven in particular, on the composition of the text.<sup>91</sup> However, if the music being played on the gramophone could influence Woolf's writing, is it not possible that the medium through which this music was played may have left an imprint on Woolf's text as well? As a communication technology that records and plays back sound using circular disks, the gramophone presents some interesting similarities to the overall structure of *The Waves*. One might say that the gramophone encompasses the different experiences of time – linear, circular, and the immersive present of a “moment of being” – that *The Waves* attempts to convey. There is a linearity to the experience of listening to a gramophone record from beginning to end; yet this process consists of a needle tracing a circular or spiral pattern over the wave-like ridges of the disc, a design that also folds together moments that may be far separated in linear time. Finally, there is a way in which a gramophone recording contains the entirety of a particular auditory experience – a small pocket of time that can be immersively entered into. As Kittler points out, technologies such as the phonograph<sup>92</sup> and cinematograph record the very flow of auditory and visual experience as it occurs. Whereas previous recording technologies, most notably

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<sup>91</sup> In her diaries, Woolf specifically mentions listening to the gramophone while sketching out early ideas for *The Waves* on June 18, 1927 (Woolf, *Diary Three* 139) and on November 28, 1928 (209). In both cases, she frames this pairing of listening and sketching as a kind of daily habit. Her entry for December 22, 1930, records that her inspiration for how to end the text came to her while listening to Beethoven's quartet (339). Given that earlier references to listening to Beethoven all took place via the gramophone, it isn't too much of a stretch to suppose one might be present here as well.

<sup>92</sup> Phonographs and gramophones are similar machines in that they record sound by inscribing it onto a pliable surface that can be “read” back into sound by a needle. As Bonnie Kime Scott explains in her essay “The Subversive Mechanics of Woolf's Gramophone” (2000), which focuses on *Between the Acts* (1941), the main difference between the phonograph and gramophones is that the latter improved upon the former by replacing the bulky cylinders on which phonographs recorded sounds with discs. “Gramophone” is both the name of the machine and the Gramophone Company that produced them (B. Scott, “Subversive” 97).

technologies of writing or print, had to disrupt the flow of experience as it moves from one moment to the next and transform it into alphabetic code in order to capture it, technologies like the phonograph record and store time itself (Kittler, *Gramophone* 3). Moreover, phonographs do not hear as the human ear does. While the human ear focalizes, separating out linguistic from non-linguistic sound, the phonograph records and plays back sound without differentiating sense from noise (23).

Such an experience of time – an immersive experience consisting of pure perception without the mediation of language – is certainly related to Woolf’s notion of a “moment of being.” The one scene in which a gramophone appears supports such associations. It features Neville, a character whose repeated desire to immerse himself within the experience of a particular moment we contrasted earlier with Bernard’s desire to narrate experience, a process that, like Kittler’s description of writing, breaks the flow of time in order to separate it into linguistic units. While at university, Neville sits upon a river shore observing a boat filled with young men lounging and eating fruit as they listen to a gramophone. This scene is clearly one of desire, as Neville watches the young men peel and throw banana skins overboard. He describes them surrounded by various phallic symbols and adornments, in terms that invoke a kind of Wildean fin-de-siècle decadence: “All they do is beautiful. There are cruets behind them and ornaments; their rooms are full of oars and oleographs but they have turned all to beauty” (Woolf, *Waves* 82). Neville sees the young men as imitations of the ultimate object of his desire, Percival. Neville’s desire for these young men is also, however, tied up in his desire to experience the scene itself in a particular way:

In a world which contains the present moment...why discriminate?  
Nothing should be named lest by doing so we change it. Let it exist,  
this bank, this beauty, and I, for one instant, steeped in pleasure. The  
sun is hot. I see the river. I see trees specked and burnt in the autumn  
twilight...Far away a bell tolls, but not for death. (81)

On the one hand, this kind of immersion within the moment, focusing on the experience of perception itself without reflection, invokes a Paterian sensibility that fits the fin-de-siècle overtones of the scene itself (Haule 199-200). At the same time, Neville's desire for this kind of unfiltered experience of perception could also be called "gramphonic."

*The Waves'* incorporation and invocation of oral/aural media is also part of a larger pattern of how the text draws attention to its status as writing. This contribution is more than just the idea that the invocation of sound highlights the absence of aural experience for the reader, in the way that Marlow's intense desire for the deep, experiential knowledge he believes just hearing Kurtz's voice will impart makes the reader aware that Kurtz's voice is forever inaccessible to him or her, although this idea is relevant too. For example, repeated references to choruses draw attention to points when *The Waves* attempts to be chorus-like but cannot quite achieve the temporal simultaneity or blending of sound required. To convey the "chorus" of the young men at university, sounds need to be named separately ("rollicking," "smashing," "gallop[ing]") (91). Similarly the chorus-like blending of sounds in the city heard by the friends while at dinner with Percival must be named individually – "Motor-cars, vans, omnibuses...wheels, bells, the cries of drunkards, of

merrymakers” – before they can be “all churned into one sound, steel blue, circular” (135). This dinner also provides one of the several points at which the soliloquies become the most chorus-like. The soliloquies switch from their typical form of long blocks of text to short, mostly one to two sentence statements by each character, each recalling a childhood scene from earlier in the text. There is a sense of simultaneity to these articulations of childhood memories, as they are introduced by Bernard’s invocation that “[We] who have sung like eager birds each his own song” are now “shuffling closer on our perch in this restaurant” (123). Bernard’s statement invokes the birds described in the interlude preceding this scene, which are described as mostly singing individually and with a passion that borders on desperation, except for brief moments “[n]ow and again” when “*their songs ran together in swift scales like the interlacings of a mountain stream*” (109). This moment represents joining of songs; yet, because the medium of the book differs from that of a choral performance – either in the sense of a Greek chorus or a musical choir – each character’s thoughts must be presented separately, in a linear fashion, as writing on a page.

*The Waves* also draws attention to its own status as a written text through numerous images that either directly or indirectly invoke the idea of writing. The first interlude opens with just such an image:

*The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick*

*strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (7)*

The “*thick strokes*” of the waves move across the water like ink marking a page, like the slanting, italicized font of this portion of the text itself. Moreover, the fact that all the interludes appear in italics, thus off-setting them from the rest of the text, serves as a further visual reminder of the book as writing-object. This first interlude offers a biblical creation scene, featuring, as it does, the rising sun rising over a dark, formless ocean.<sup>93</sup> In Woolf’s beginning, then, there was writing. Not, as the Book of John would have it, “the Word,” but writing as an act, as a movement, and as a perpetual one, at that. This movement of the waves that evokes writing ends in an act of erasure, as each stroke “rose, heaped itself, broke and swept” the shore; yet as each wave breaks, another replaces it (7).

Like the pen-like motion of the waves, Bernard’s recurrent memory from his childhood of the woman writing in the wood of Elvedon, paired with the gardener sweeping, invokes writing as an act of inscription and erasure. This sign proves particularly opaque to Bernard, who senses that they represent something both eternal and inevitable, but without a name. As Bernard describes his first encounter with these figures during his final soliloquy:

Down below, through the depths of the leaves, the gardeners swept the lawn with great brooms. The lady sat writing. Transfixed, stopped dead, I thought ‘I cannot interfere with a single strong of those

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<sup>93</sup> Molly Hite compares this first interlude to Genesis 1: 1-2 in the King James Version of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth/And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (qtd. Hite, *Waves* 221). Hite also points out that in the first draft of *The Waves*, Woolf began with an unnamed female narrator who proclaims: “I am telling myself the story of the world from the beginning. I am not concerned with the single life, but with lives together” (qtd. 221).

brooms. They sweep and they sweep. Nor with the fixity of that woman writing.’ It is strange that one cannot stop gardeners sweeping nor dislodge a woman. There they have remained all my life. It is as if one had woken in Stonehenge surrounded by a circle of great stones, these enemies, these presences. (240-241).

These figures remain for Bernard omnipresent yet inscrutable. Like Stonehenge, they are potent but opaque symbols, carrying an unknown meaning. One of the results of this opacity is that the woman and the gardener become symbols of symbols. In a similar way to the inscriptive waves described at the beginning of the first interlude, the woman and the gardener invoke writing as a ceaseless act and ubiquitous object.

Bernard’s attempt to interpret these signs invokes yet another way *The Waves* draws attention to its status as text, one that might be considered to be the opposite side of the same coin of its deployment of images of writing. *The Waves* features numerous examples of characters either reading or engaged in acts of interpretation that are coded as reading. Neville and Louis are at various times portrayed as reading books in public venues, on trains or in a pub. Bernard is, in his own way, an avid reader – not of books, but of people – as his storytelling is at times presented as a simultaneous kind of interpretive act. Before he offers character sketches of friends or other people he encounters, Bernard often remarks his awareness of “signs.” He “furbish[es]” up the sketch of the man on the train by observing “imperceptible signs” (68). When Neville comes to share his poem with Bernard, the latter observes: “You are making some protest, as you slide with an inexpressibly familiar gesture, your hand along your knee. By such signs, we diagnose our friends’ diseases” (85).

Bernard then proceeds to, as he says, “create” Neville, to use this gesture as a basis for constructing a story about Neville’s state of mind, which he follows up with the question, “Have I read the little gesture of your left hand correctly?” (85). Such an intertwining of storytelling and reading recalls Woolf’s idea from her essay “How Should One Read a Book?” that reading is a creative act that asks readers, consciously or unconsciously, to become kinds of storytellers themselves.<sup>94</sup> It also conveys a sense that acts of “reading,” or interpretation, suffuse human interactions. Bernard and Neville’s differing suppositions that the man on the train is a builder or a horse-dealer, respectively, hinge upon their different readings of his coral ornament. From this perspective, Rhoda’s difficulty in connecting with other people can be connected to her struggle with interpreting written figures. Moreover, because these acts are at times framed as the interpretation of ‘signs’ or as ‘reading,’ they foreground the very act in which the reader of *The Waves* is engaged. Existing alongside, and occasionally in tension with, the novel’s oral-mode of narration, these kinds of self-reflexive invocations of writing and reading contribute towards creating a hypermediate reading experience. In drawing attention to the reader’s own act of reading, they emphasize the reader’s encounter with *The Waves* as a text as an immediate experience of medium.

These moments of “reading” in *The Waves* also demonstrate how the body itself is a medium, one that exists within a network of other media and through which

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<sup>94</sup> Woolf develops this idea gradually over the course of her essay. She asserts at the beginning that in order to fairly judge a book, the reader should “not dictate to your author; [but] try to become him” (Woolf, “How” 259). By the end of the essay, however, reading becomes an act of creation as much as interpretation, requiring the “rarest qualities of imagination, insight, and judgment” (269). This blurring of the line between reading and storytelling could also be said to occur in “On Not Knowing Greek,” an essay discussed at even more length in the Preface of this study. In this essay, Woolf reveals how the act of “reading” Greek literature for she and her British contemporaries is caught up in creating an idea of the ancient Greeks and their culture. Similarly, in the essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” discussed earlier in this chapter, Woolf draws connections between “character-reading” and “character-creating,” again highlight reading as itself a creative act (“Mr. Bennett” 90-93).

individuals are subject to and negotiate cultural narratives in order to establish a sense of embodied identity. Louis offers a particularly lucid example of a character who navigates larger cultural narratives of nationalism in relation to various media. Louis clearly enjoys different relations to language in its different spoken and written forms. The son of an Australian banker, Louis poignantly feels how his position as colonial “other” separates him from his peers in the nursery and at school and, later in life, from the everyday people he encounters in London. Louis’ desire to transcend this otherness is simultaneously posed as a desire to escape a sense of being a physical body within the present. These desires are evident in Louis’ attempt as a young child to hide in the bushes from his playmates. He imagines his body becoming a plant with roots that stretch through layers of earth, time, and space to allow him to become a stone figure on the bank of the Nile, but this illusion is shattered by the encroachment of Jinny with her “eyebeam” (“I”-beam) and kiss – both of which Louis feels as a physical blow (12).

However, while Louis will always feel a certain amount of self-consciousness about his appearance, it is really his voice that ultimately “marks” him, as colonial other. Sitting at his Latin lessons as a child, Louis hesitates to speak, although he knows his lessons better than anyone else, because “My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with a colonial accent” – a refrain that Louis will repeat throughout his life (19). Years later as a young man dining at an eating-house, Louis feels acutely the rhythm of the city, a rhythm that includes noises of passing cars, opening and closing doors, and the sounds of other diners. Yet it is a rhythm that he cannot join in. As he explains, “Yet I am not included. If I speak, imitating their accent, they prick their



ears, waiting for me to speak again, in order that they may place me – if I come from Canada or Australia, I, who desire above all things to be taken to the arms with love, an alien, external” (94). Louis senses that his voice marks his body as national “other,” interpolating him in a process over which he has no control.

For this reason, Louis prefers, and even revels in, the identity he can negotiate through other forms of media that allow him to separate language from voice or voice from body. Such an impetus lies behind Louis’ passion for writing. As a young poet, Louis imagines himself forging words on the page into a “ring of steel,” imposing an order of his own on the world (40). Later as a rising businessman, Louis finds another means of imposing order and of shifting his sense of self, at least for brief spans of time, from that of an outsider to an insider. As he states:

I am half in love with the typewriter and the telephone. With letters and cables and brief but courteous commands on the telephone to Paris, Berlin, New York I have fused many lives into one; I have helped by my assiduity and decision to score those lines on the map there by which the different parts of the world are laced together....I love the telephone with its lip stretched to my whisper; and the date on the wall; and the engagement book...If I press on, from chaos making order, I shall find myself where Chatham stood, and Pitt, Burke, and Sir Robert Peel. Thus I expunge certain stains, and erase old defilements; the woman who gave me a flag from the top of the Christmas tree; my accent; beatings and other tortures; the boasting boys; my father, a banker at Brisbane. (167-168)

What Woolf provides for us here is a portrait of individual subjectivity as a complex, multimedia production, of national identity networked through cultural narratives that are materially manifest, including ancient and more recent symbols like the Christmas tree and the Union Jack. Mentioned three times by Louis in this passage, the telephone is particularly significant to him, for while it severs voice (with its colonial accent) from body (marked as “other”) it also has a connecting function, as its cables cross from city to city, lacing the world together in a way both similar and different to the lines on a map. Louis has for the moment a sense of the power of being a mapmaker; yet he is also himself in a way inescapably mapped.<sup>95</sup>

This notion that identity is networked through story and among various physical media is an idea that Woolf pushes further in her final and unfinished novel *Between the Acts*. This later text is less focused on the intricacies of individual subjectivity and more on what might be called communal or even national identity. *Between the Acts* is a novel that compulsively draws attention to the means by which the local community surrounding Pointz Hall knows and sees itself as part of the larger national community of England. This is a matter of this community understanding itself in both temporal terms, as part of a unit that has moved and will continue to move along a linear, historical trajectory, and in what might be called spatial terms, as a unit of people existing in the present at a particular physical location and in relation to other groups also existing in the present at different locations.

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<sup>95</sup> Kate Mitchell’s critically-acclaimed dramatic production of *The Waves*, which debuted at the London National Theater in 2006, picks-up on and intensifies this notion of subjectivity as a kind of multimedia production that Woolf gestures towards in her portrayal of Louis. Mitchell’s production uses live actors who “speak” the parts of the six characters against the backdrop of a large screen, on which images are projected, sometimes of the characters, sometimes of objects, and sometimes multiple images at the same time.

The novel's title, *Between the Acts*, on one level refers to the primary "event" of the narrative, the production of a pageant-play by a country village community one afternoon in 1939. In a similar way that Percival stands at the heart of *The Waves*, serving as a central object and embodiment of Englishness to which all the other characters look and against which they measure themselves, the pageant-play, as a ritualized oral performance of deep significance within English national history,<sup>96</sup> stands at the heart of *Between the Acts* as a kind of emblem of the nation. Yet, the pageant-play is just one of the numerous mediums through which narratives of history erupt into and actively shape the present. *Between the Acts* further expands our notion of what could be called a medium by emphasizing the ways that not just formal performances or communication technologies, but everyday objects, buildings, and even landscapes carry into the present narratives of culture and history. The final act of the pageant-play, in which Miss LaTrobe's troop of local villagers hold up various reflective objects to confront the audience with a fragmented image of itself, mirrors the novel's own demonstration of the way that individual and communal identities are patched together from these disparate and disparately received narratives.

## **Conclusion**

*The Waves* deploys an oral mode and depicts an oral storyteller, yet it fundamentally aims to reinvent the written tradition of the novel. To return one final time to the diary quote that serves as an epigraph for this chapter, in writing of her

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<sup>96</sup> For an excellent and in depth discussion of the development of the pageant-play, its role in English history, and the resurgence of interest in this dramatic form during the 1930's, see Jed Esty's chapter on "Insular Rites: Virginia Woolf and the Late Modernist Pageant-Play" in *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (2004).

early vision for *The Waves*, Woolf announced that she was “not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done that way” (Woolf, *Diary Three* 229). Her intention, rather, was to create a work that would convey “life itself going on” (229). Woolf’s plan was to create a work governed by the logic of immediacy, a work that would erase itself as medium so that its audience might directly access the experience represented. However, what she ultimately wrote is a work that consciously draws attention to itself as a medium and to the reader’s own act of engaging with it. On the one hand, one could argue that this state of affairs reveals a discrepancy between intention and action on Woolf’s part; however, based on the way that the text itself highlights the numerous and varied ways in which individual experience of the world is mediated, I argue that the hypermediacy of *The Waves* reflects a late modernist, and arguably proto-postmodernist, understanding of how human beings encounter the world. *The Waves* is “hypermediate” because life is inescapably mediated. The experience of this mediation, however, is directly grounded in the body. Woolf’s deployment of orality within her written narration emphasizes reading itself as an embodied experience.

Woolf’s portrayal of unnatural oral storytelling within *The Waves* is, in some ways, very much in line with the engagements with oral storytelling we examined previously. Like Conrad and West, Woolf recognizes the way that pre-existing cultural narratives come to shape subjectivity and individual understanding of experience, and she uses oral storytelling as a means to critique previous literary traditions, both for their failure to authentically represent human experience and their failure to recognize their own limitations. All three authors recognize and deploy

orality as a cultural signifier, as an act that carries its own set of meanings when plugged into particular contexts. Conrad deploys and then undermines associations of oral storytelling with authority based upon firsthand experience, particularly within the context of European encounters with other cultures through imperial expansion. West plays with stereotypes of female oral storytellers as trifling gossips, scheming seductresses, or prescient oracles. Woolf stands out, however, for her focus on what orality means *in writing*. By using quotation marks to create an oral-mode of narration, without providing the direct speech or thoughts of her characters, and by providing unnatural and consciously non-mimetic representations of Bernard's oral storytelling scenes, Woolf both highlights and refuses our expectations of oral storytelling as a literary device. In doing so, she denaturalizes the narrative we read as well as the familiar reading experience, ultimately drawing into question our understanding of what constitutes the "natural."

This is a difference between Woolf and the previous two authors we have looked at, one that leads into our exploration of Beckett's engagement with oral storytelling in *Krapp's Last Tape*, the topic of my final chapter. In addition to considering oral storytelling as a cultural signifier, Woolf also engages orality as a physical medium, one that creates a particular affective experience between speakers and listeners. She invokes this affective experience and turns its focus on the reader by creating a written mode of narration that incorporates oral performance and media, even if she cannot completely reproduce them. In doing so, she shifts the relation between her text and its audience, enhancing her audience's awareness of their role as interpreters, both of her text and of the world.

## Chapter 5

### Speaking the Postmodern Subject: Mechanical Orality and Media Networks in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*

Storytellers abound in the works of Samuel Beckett, despite the fact that, or perhaps one could say because, Beckett's oeuvre seems driven by an impulse evocatively characterized by H. Porter Abbott as "narratricide," or the breaking down of narrative.<sup>97</sup> From his early novels to his mid-career plays to his later dramaticules and minimalist fiction, storytellers are everywhere in Beckett. Arsene of Beckett's *Watt* (1953) provides a rambling narration to Watt, apparently to offer an explanation of himself and the comings and goings in Mr. Knott's house. In *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Didi and Gogo tell each other, or try to tell each other, stories "to pass the time" (Beckett, *Waiting* 6). Story performances are central to the action, insofar as we can speak of "action," of *Endgame* (1957). Nagg recounts for Nell his joke about the tailor and the memory of their engagement in an attempt to connect with her and reconnect them both to a happier time in the past, and Hamm narrates his "chronicle," which may (or may not) be the tale of how Clov came into his service, as an assertion of his power (*Endgame* 58). In "Company" (1980), a narrator alone and in the dark tells himself stories for company. All of these attempts at storytelling are, in various ways, failures, and these failures point to the inability of narrative to fulfill the contract it lays out for itself.

Among Beckett's works portraying storytellers, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) stands out for presenting a peculiar kind of oral narration, as his "story" is produced

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<sup>97</sup> See his essay "Narratricide: Samuel Beckett as Autographer" (1987) or the chapter on "Narratricide" in *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (1996). Abbott's "narratricide" is a breaking down or "disassembling" of narrative, aligned through his neologism with both the killing of the father and "the erasure of the Oedipal conflict" as a means of discovering the self (Abbott, "Narratricide" 43).

through the combination of an onstage actor and a tape recorder. *Krapp's Last Tape* draws its dramatic power from the notion that there is something special about the spoken word, although the exact nature of this “specialness” and whether it survives the course of this approximately hour long production is precisely the matter that this chapter seeks to determine. Certainly, both the play itself and the story of its genesis invoke the idea that the spoken word carries a meaning, or perhaps an affect, in excess of the words spoken. Beckett was inspired to write *Krapp's Last Tape* after hearing the voice of Patrick Magee as he read excerpts from *Molloy* and *An Abandoned Work* on a BBC radio program in 1957.<sup>98</sup> Incorporating Beckett's own experience of listening to disembodied voice over the radio, *Krapp's Last Tape* presents old man Krapp on his sixty-ninth birthday engaged in his yearly ritual of recording memories from the past year after listening to tapes made on past birthdays. As a performance of self-narration, *Krapp's Last Tape* invokes similar questions concerning the relationship between story – in this case, recorded memories – and embodied identity that we see recurring in other texts we have examined so far. However, as a play, *Krapp's Last Tape* also provides us with the opportunity to encounter concepts such as performance, bodily presence, and voice – concepts intricately associated with orality – in a different context and to extend our conclusions concerning orality in literary modernism beyond the written form of the novel.

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<sup>98</sup> Beckett's original title for *Krapp's Last Tape* was, in fact, the “Magee Monologue.” It was first performed at the London Royal Court Theater in 1958 as a companion piece for the English premier of *Endgame*, which at seventy-five minutes was deemed too short to stand alone. Over the next several decades, *Krapp's Last Tape* was performed numerous times, on occasion directed by Beckett himself. Thus the play has undergone numerous revisions, each of which could have implications for matters discussed in this chapter. Because it is important not to lose track of either individual performances or the genesis of the play, this chapter adopts the following protocols. Unless otherwise indicated, references in this chapter are from the first published edition of the play. Subsequent versions are indicated when used. For a history tracing some of the best-known performances of *Krapp's Last Tape* over the decades, see Ruby Cohn's article “A Krapp Chronology” (2006).

This chapter explores how Beckett's play both invokes and undermines specific cultural assumptions concerning the spoken word and its relation to the body, particularly associations of orality with transparency, authenticity and authority that circulated within and lent power to the movements of British Romanticism and, more recently and closer to home for Beckett, the Irish Literary Revival. Both these movements see speech as aligned with what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call the cultural logic of immediacy, that is it offers some sort of direct access to the object or experience represented (Bolter 6). Similar ideas circulate within the discourses surrounding emergent audio-technologies in the early and mid-twentieth-century. Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* both highlights and interrogates such notions through its deployment of what I call "mechanical orality," that is, a story performance where the speaking body is replaced or supplemented by mechanical technology. As part of a larger motif of repetition that suffuses Beckett's play, mechanical orality alters the locus of authority not only in relation to the recorded word but spoken language more broadly, undercutting notions of immediacy and authenticity and shifting authority from the point of origin to the field of reception.

Moreover, Beckett's play draws attention to the ways in which the mediums through which we communicate shape our understanding of our past and, in turn, the self in the present. In this way, *Krapp's Last Tape* does not just undercut cultural assumptions concerning the authority and transparency of the spoken word, but the very stability of the subject that speaks and listens. By presenting a memory-narrative through the combination of Krapp and his tape recorder, Beckett's play creates a storytelling subject of uncertain coherence, which is at once fragmented and



networked. In this way, *Krapp's Last Tape* pushes us beyond epistemological questions concerning the efficacy of memory and accuracy of perception and representation towards ontological issues of the indeterminacy of the boundaries of the embodied subject. In other words, Beckett's play provides us with a prescient glimpse of a postmodernist deployment of orality.

This chapter contributes to the fields of Beckett scholarship and twentieth-century literary studies in two ways. Firstly, it performs important work in terms of contextualizing *Krapp's Last Tape's* engagement with orality within multiple cultural discourses. As was previously mentioned, these discourses include the British Romantic movement and the Irish Literary Revival, as well as discourses surrounding audio-technology and the theater itself. While some of these fields of engagement have been acknowledged, others, such as the Revival, have been until recently sorely neglected. Recognizing these discourses as overlapping is important because it demonstrates the pervasiveness and persistence of the cultural assumptions *Krapp's Last Tape* confronts, and provides one of several reasons for the continued relevance of Beckett's play today.

Secondly, this chapter offers a way to think about Beckett in relation to postmodernism that is not directed entirely by poststructuralist theory, that gives us the opportunity to consider the role of the body not as a mere signified but as a material presence. This is not to say that poststructuralist theory has nothing to contribute to our understanding of Beckett's text. In fact, I see a Derridean approach as useful in the process of identifying some of the cultural assumptions concerning the spoken and the written word that *Krapp's Last Tape* engages, as well as some of

the ways these assumptions are broken down. However, as this chapter demonstrates, *Krapp's Last Tape* also resonates with the work of theorists like the above-mentioned Bolter and Grusin, Friedrich Kittler, and Bruno Latour, who have built upon Derrida, but whose focus on technology and media leads them to posit language as a physical network as well as a network of signs. In this way, my work in this chapter is in conversation with Ulrika Maude's recent book, *Beckett, Technology, and the Body* (2009), a work in which Maude challenges the predominant critical formulation of Beckett as a writer who values the mind over the body and whose work exclusively "tends towards disembodiment, silence, and stasis" (Maude 4). While Maude is more interested in correcting misconceptions in Beckett studies, I see her work and my own in this chapter as having important implications for our understanding of postmodernism itself. Focusing on orality in *Krapp's Last Tape* introduces new grounds for thinking about how the body figures in postmodernism.

### **Narrating Krapp: Storytelling and Subject Formation**

*Krapp's Last Tape* presents one man's determined attempt to establish a stable and coherent sense of selfhood. Like other storyteller performers we have looked at over the course of this project, Krapp attempts to use narrative, or the act of narrating his memories of the previous year, as a means to accomplish this task. Krapp's recording of these narratives every year on his birthday further emphasizes this attempt. The word "tape" itself from the title serves as a multivalent indicator of his intention. In addition to being a clear reference to the spools of magnetically impressed ribbon on which Krapp records his words, the word "tape" can also refer to

a tool used for measurement or to a strip of cloth or other material used to tie objects together or hold an object, like a garment, closed.<sup>99</sup> Measurement, connection, bounding – these are precisely the kinds of self-delineating functions for which Krapp attempts to deploy narrative; yet, the play ultimately challenges narrative’s ability to fill such roles in a lasting or meaningful way.

Narrative is one of numerous kinds of measurement that Krapp applies over the course of the play as he seeks to establish the parameters of who he is, like the statistics kept by his thirty-nine-year-old-self of how many hours he spends in the local pub or the number of volumes he has sold of his work that the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp notes while contemplating “getting known” (Beckett, *Krapp’s* 62). Ritually recorded every year on his birthday, Krapp’s tapes serve to measure his current state, how he has changed, and his progress towards achieving particular desires. The fact that Krapp writes the index for his collection of taped narratives in a ledger, a kind of book in which businesses track their accounts, adds further weight to this notion of narrative as measurement.<sup>100</sup>

This association of narrative with measurement resonates with other Beckett texts as well. In *Endgame*, the play with which the original production of *Krapp’s*

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<sup>99</sup> “tape”: “1.a. A narrow woven strip of stout linen, cotton, silk, or other textile, used as a string for tying garments, and for other purposes for which flat strings are suited, also for measuring lines, etc; 2.a. A long, narrow, thin and flexible strip of metal or the like; *esp.* such a strip of steel used as a measuring line in surveying” (“tape”).

<sup>100</sup> Certainly not coincidentally, a less-often used definition of “ledger” is “a flat stone slab covering a grave” (“ledger,” *OED*). This secondary definition seems particularly fitting to the situation of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, where Krapp’s recordings serve as markers or memorials of a sort to his past selves. Beckett, in fact, saw Krapp’s listening to and recording of his tapes as a kind of exchange amongst the dead and the dying. As he wrote to Alan Schneider, an American director and close friend who was preparing a performance of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in 1960: “Krapp has nothing to talk to but his dying self and nothing to talk to him but his dead one” (Harmon, *No* 59). For another work of criticism that discusses the ledger as a literary figure connected to a particular type of dominant narrative that views life in measured terms of debts owed and paid, money spent and saved, see Linda Kauffman’s discussion of the ledger in her chapter “Devious Channels of Decorous Order: Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom!*” in *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1986).

*Last Tape* was paired, Hamm makes repeated references to various obscure units of measurement in the course of telling the tale that may be the history of his relation to Clov (*Endgame* 58). Hamm relates in his “*Narrative tone*” how a man came and asked him to help save his son on a day that was “zero by the thermometer,” “fifty by the heliometer,” “a hundred by the anemometer,” and “zero by the hygrometer” (51, 51, 51, 52, 53). Of course, the whole time, the weather outside is “zero” and the world around is “corpsed” in all directions (29, 30). Hamm’s narrative is an attempt to assert his power and, as Nels Pearson convincingly argues, his identity as master over Clov (Pearson 221-223). However, like every other unit of measurement in Hamm’s post-nuclear/post-holocaust world, it adds up to nothing. In a similar vein, Krapp’s attempts to measure and track change, value, or meaning in his own life often come up short. Indeed, Krapp’s existence, as it is established onstage and through the narrations on his tapes, seems structured much more through repetitions than a measureable progression. Year after year, Krapp enacts the same recording ritual. He is still addicted to bananas, still plagued by the same bowel condition, still alone. In fact, the most dramatic change in Krapp’s condition over the course of the decades appears to be that the possibility of greater changes, of hope for love or for literary success, has steadily dwindled away. Krapp’s narrations fail as measurements because there is so little to measure.

Krapp’s tapes also present an attempt to use narrative to delineate the self by creating both connections and boundaries, establishing the parameters by which the self is related to that which is not-self in the world. Krapp’s acts of narrating and listening to his memories can be seen as attempts to create or discern patterns of

meaning from out of the sequence of his lived experiences in the same way that the young Bernard from Woolf's *The Waves* explains his impulse to narrate his experiences: "I must open the little trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another" (Woolf, *Waves* 49). Out of these patterns, Krapp constructs a sense of individuality, of self as a coherent and contained entity. Indeed, Krapp's tapes often appear associated with objects of containment. Krapp keeps his new spools in drawers, and he stores the used ones in cardboard or, in later performances, metal boxes.<sup>101</sup> Later performances also have Krapp retrieve the recorder from its storage space in the cubby (another contained area) at the back of the stage. Krapp listens to and creates his narrations within the enclosed space of the pool of light cast by the lamp above his desk. This light is clearly associated with Krapp's conscious sense of being an solitary, individual self, as his recorded thirty-nine-year-old self states of the lamp when it is new: "The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [*Pause.*] In a way. [*Pause.*] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to... [*hesitates*]...me. [*Pause.*] Krapp" (57).

Of course, these enclosures do not always hold. In a moment of frustration and anger Krapp knocks his boxes of spools from his desk, breaking the boxes open and scattering the spools across the floor. Krapp must now tread on his own memories when he goes back to the cubby for a drink. These trips to the cubby

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<sup>101</sup> The use of tin, rather than cardboard boxes, was first introduced during the production of *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt in Berlin in 1969, which was directed by Beckett. This switching of tin for cardboard was performed with the specific intention of allowing Krapp to make more noise when he moves the boxes and knocks them to the floor. As Beckett noted in his notebook for the Schiller performance, "As much noise as poss. [possible] with objects throughout" (qtd. Beckett, *Theatrical* 18-19).

themselves present instances where Krapp leaves his pool of self-delineating light, appropriately enough to seek the solace of the self-annihilating bottle. Narrative is a means for Krapp to create borders, to delineate and define the perimeters of selfhood, and thus it stands in conflict to those forces of time and forgetting that threaten the stability and staying power of his sense of being a coherent and contained being. This is precisely the reason Krapp gives for recording his narratives – to make them last, to preserve them “against the day when my work will be done and no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that...[hesitates]...for the fire that set it alight” (60).

**Speech, Writing, and the Recorded Word: Some Cultural Contexts for *Krapp's Last Tape***

Creating a recording, however, is not the only choice Krapp has for preserving his narrated memories. Krapp's choice to narrate aloud and record his memories, rather than write them down, highlights some specific cultural assumptions concerning the spoken versus the written word. Krapp is, after all, a writer, yet he chooses to make his yearly ritual one centered on listening, oral narration, and recording rather than reading and writing. Of course, this choice is also a dramatic device deployed by Beckett, and I will address the effects created by this device shortly. Moreover, it is important at all times to keep in mind that, as a play, *Krapp's Last Tape* itself exists via a medium in which speech occupies a central role, and thus any commentary Beckett's play engages in concerning the efficacy or authority of the spoken word potentially reverberates back on itself. This point is one I will return to as well. First, however, I want to make the argument that we can understand Krapp's

decision to narrate aloud and record his memories in relation to two historical and literary movements that invest the spoken word with a large degree of authority – the British Romantic movement and the Irish Literary Revival. *Krapp's Last Tape* invokes and pushes against these movements in both blatant and more subtle ways, and draws attention to how notions of the transparency, authenticity, and immediacy of speech posited by writers in these movements are also present in discourses surrounding emerging audio-technologies in the early and mid-twentieth-century. Writers within both these movements invest the spoken word with authority and power based on the idea of language as a medium that draws meaning from its point of origin and from the conceptualization of this point of origin as a stable and coherent subject.

*Krapp's Last Tape* invokes the British Romantic movement in ways that touch directly on issues of language and self-representation. Krapp himself stands as a parodic portrait of the aged Romantic poet. The ecstatic grandeur of Krapp's "vision" at the end of the jetty, with the violent description of the waves crashing against the rocks and the storm winds, brings to mind the Burkean sublime. Enoch Brater calls this vision "Byronically romantic," a description that seems particularly appropriate given Krapp's exclamation that "the dark" he has struggled to keep under control is his greatest strength, an invocation of the self as a type of Byronic-hero (Brater "Beckett's" 145; Beckett, *Krapp's* 60). As Laubach-Kiani has noted, Krapp's annual birthday ritual of recording his thoughts on the past year fulfills Wordsworth's stipulation in his 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry ought to present "emotion recollected in tranquility" (Laubach-Kiani 127-128; Wordsworth 206).

More than this, however, Krapp's use of the tape recorder literally attempts to fulfill the romantic desire to authentically represent human experience by reproducing oral speech (Laubach-Kiani 134). As Wordsworth describes his intentions in writing his poetry in his "Preface": "I have proposed to my self to imitate and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men" (Wordsworth 200). This "language of men," or language as men speak it, offers the most transparent presentation of subjective experience and the most direct connection between the poet and the reader. Based in the body, this speech is more natural than writing, and thus Wordsworth describes his rejection of "personifications of abstract ideas" and other "mechanical device[s]" that "Writers in meter seem to lay claim to by prescription" (200). By imitating speech in his writing, Wordsworth aims "to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood" (200). This last statement in particular will resonate with our discussion of writing, speech, and mechanical orality in *Krapp's Last Tape*. The kind of embodied experience alluded to by Wordsworth here in seeking to make a "flesh and blood" connection could certainly be seen as in line with Krapp's endeavor in narrating his tapes. Time and again the audience witnesses Krapp's attempts to use language in order to communicate a bodily sensation, when he is the speaker, or to experience a bodily sensation, when he is the listener, staring into the darkness trying to see again the eyes of Bianca or the dark nurse or feeling the roundness and weight of the "small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball" in his hand (Beckett, *Krapp's* 60). We can also see in Wordsworth's positing of the relationship between speech and writing a curious kind of simultaneous opposition and transference. Speech is a



medium privileged over writing for its superior transparency and naturalness, but by imitating speech, writing can take on some of its authority.

Similar notions of the spoken word were also a preeminent force within an Irish context, particularly the Irish Literary Revival. The Irish Literary Revival was a powerful cultural force during the early twentieth-century that fed into and grew out of the push for Ireland's independence. Writers within this movement, or revivalists, as I will call them, sought to instill a sense of Irish national pride by creating art that reclaimed what they saw as authentic Irish culture, which was based in a lost pre-modern, and therefore pre-imperial, communal past. The Revival shared with the Romantic Movement, among other things,<sup>102</sup> an idealization of the spoken word. This idealization in part stems from a sense that skillful oral performance and the inclination to listen to and appreciate the oral performances of others were fundamentally "Irish" characteristics. Scholars of Irish culture and literature such as Georges D. Zimmerman and Alan W. Friedman have extensively documented the significance of storytelling and oral performance in Ireland.<sup>103</sup> This sentiment is precisely what the founders of the Irish Literary Revival hoped to plug into, particularly in their emphasis on the development of a uniquely Irish theater tradition.

As Lady Augusta Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and Edward Martyn declared in

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<sup>102</sup> The British Romantic movement and the Irish Literary Revival certainly overlap in both their historical and cultural trajectories. I am using the term "Irish Literary Revival" very specifically to refer to the movement that took place in Ireland beginning in the early twentieth-century. The Irish Literary Revival can be seen as part of the even larger movement of the Celtic Revival, which spans back to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-centuries (Castle 3-4). As a movement that was for a time contemporary with British Romanticism, the Celtic Revival shared many of the same cultural currents, and indeed both could be categorized as kind of national manifestations of an even larger European Romanticism.

<sup>103</sup> Zimmerman's *The Irish Storyteller* (2001) provides a lengthy and comprehensive history and analysis of the figure of the oral storyteller in Irish culture, tracking references and representations from before the middle ages to today. The first chapter of Friedman's *Party Pieces: Oral Storytelling and Social Performance in Joyce and Beckett* (2007) provides a much abridged analysis of the role of the storyteller, while also focusing on a somewhat broader category of "social performance" that includes song and dance in addition to spoken narrative.

their initial 1897 statement of intent, reprinted in Gregory's memoir *Our Irish Theater* (1913), "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed" (Gregory 9). The focus on orality and the spoken word is thus a return to authentic Irish origins.

Many of the most prominent writers of the Irish Literary Revival perceived the spoken word itself as capable of conveying not only a certain authentic notion of "Irishness," but also a kind of knowledge uncorrupted by the modern world. Yeats in particular idealized the notion of what Walter Ong would call "primary orality," that is, speech that has not been influenced by the knowledge or presence of writing. In his essay "What is Popular Poetry?" (1902), Yeats writes that the profoundest poetry is based upon knowledge that comes from what he calls "the unwritten tradition" (Yeats, "What" 347). For this reason, these poets and playwrights, similarly to the British Romantic poets, drew authority from their ability to listen to and reproduce in writing supposedly authentic Irish speech. In his 1905 "Preface" to the First Edition of J. M. Synge's *The Well of Saints*, Yeats describes how upon first meeting the young Synge, Yeats found his work to be "full of that kind of morbidity that has its root in too much brooding over methods of expression, and ways of looking upon life, which come, not out of life, but out of literature, images reflected from mirror to mirror" (Yeats, "Preface" 216). In other words, Yeats saw Synge's art as exhibiting a kind of artificiality associated with writing. To cure this problem, Yeats sent Synge to

the Aran Islands, a group of islands off the west coast of Ireland where traditional Irish culture has been preserved and the Irish language is still spoken.<sup>104</sup> There he finds inspiration by “listening also to the beautiful English which has grown up in Irish-speaking districts” (217). Similarly, a few years later in his “Preface” to the 1911 edition of his own play *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge makes with apparent pride the following claim: “...as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers in Dublin” (Synge v). He also describes listening through a chink in the floor to the conversations of kitchen servant girls in a house in Wicklow while writing an earlier play, *The Shadow of the Glen*, and claims that their simple speech provided him with “more aid than any [book] learning could have given me” (vi). For both Yeats and Synge, speech contains a kind of authenticity and knowledge that is not available in, and is perhaps even at odds, with the written word.

These examples highlight both differences and some highly significant similarities between the discourses surrounding the spoken word in British Romanticism and the Irish Literary Revival. Wordsworth’s focus on communicating the subjective experience differs from Lady Gregory, Yeats, and Synge’s desire to reconnect with the origin point of Irish community. However, both Wordsworth and

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<sup>104</sup> The Aran Islands were an important cultural location both for the Irish Literary Revival and for those who sought Ireland’s political and cultural independence. In James Joyce’s “The Dead,” Miss Ivors, the patriotic young woman who insults Gabriel Conroy by calling him a “West Briton,” is planning a summer trip to the Aran Islands (Joyce, “Dead” 190).

the revivalists see the spoken word as a medium of transparency, spontaneity, authenticity, and authority. Even more than this, even though they privilege the spoken above the written word for these reasons, they assert the idea that by listening to and imitating the spoken word in their poems and/or plays, they can transfer some of the authority they grant to speech to their own work. In this way, these writers seek to make their writing, and their own subject position as an intermediary, transparent and to assert their work as an authoritative presentation of the experience, object or ideal represented. The image of Synge eavesdropping on the unknowing Wicklow servant girls from the floor above carries some troubling undertones hinting that uneven power distribution and exploitation exist within a movement that ostensibly seeks to overthrow colonial rule and colonial paradigms of thinking. This point is one I will return to comment further on before this chapter concludes. For the moment, however, I will only point out how Synge's "Preface" at once sets up these women, as well as the other "country people of Ireland" he gleans phrases from, as representing a kind of ideal of naturalness and authenticity, and then claims their speech for his own (v). Synge's hand and pen are as invisible in this formulation as his listening ear is to the servants. These notions of the transparency and authority as they relate to speech, writing, and the speaker/writer are fundamental points that Beckett's play both highlights and subverts.

Before moving on to address these points, however, I want to briefly say more about *Krapp's Last Tape*'s connection to the Irish Literary Revival. Historically, critics have been wary of considering Beckett, and particularly his later work, in a specifically Irish context. This reluctance can in part be attributed to the

unquestioning acceptance of Beckett's own conflicted and often renunciatory position towards his homeland and in part to the mistaken conviction that placing Beckett within a local context somehow makes him less cosmopolitan and, therefore, less of a modernist. Such positions have been challenged more and more over the past decade, as scholars have increasingly turned towards interpreting Beckett's work within a specifically Irish as well as an international context.<sup>105</sup> The unwillingness of earlier critics to thoroughly explore Irish connections with *Krapp's Last Tape*, beyond citing autobiographical parallels between Beckett's own life and the character of Krapp,<sup>106</sup> is no doubt at least in part due to Beckett's own declaration that "the Krapp text has nothing to do with Dublin" (qtd. Brater, *Why* 94). However, *Krapp's Last Tape* was the first of Beckett's plays to explicitly name Irish locals. Moreover, the play was written and performed in London the same year that Beckett declared a ban on performing his plays in Ireland as a protest against the censorship of Seán O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* and a stage adaption of James Joyce's *Ulysses* at the

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<sup>105</sup> John Harrington's *The Irish Beckett* (1990) and David Lloyd's chapter "Writing in Shit: Beckett, Nationalism, and the Postcolonial Subject," from his work *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment* (1993) mark an initial turning point in Beckett criticism to thinking about Beckett's later work in a distinctly Irish and postcolonial context. However, it is only since the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century that criticism has begun following this track on a larger scale. Notable works following this trend include: Nels Pearson's "'Outside of Here It's Death': Co-Dependency and the Ghosts of Decolonialization in Beckett's *Endgame*" (2001), Amanda Cagle's "Looking for Love on Samuel Beckett's Stage: Homoeroticism, Sterility and the Postcolonial Condition" (2003), Anna McMullan's "Irish/Postcolonial Beckett" (2004), Mark Quigley's "Unnaming the Subject: Samuel Beckett and Postcolonial Alterity" (2005), and the recently published collection *Beckett and Ireland* (2010), edited by Seán Kennedy. Alan W. Friedman's already mentioned work *Party Pieces: Oral Storytelling and Social Performance* (2007) also makes an important contribution to this ongoing critical paradigm shift.

<sup>106</sup> Numerous parallels have been noted by critics and biographers through the years linking Beckett and Krapp. These parallels include similarities between the landscapes described by Krapp and those of Beckett's childhood, claims that the bitch Krapp mentions in his "last" tape is the Kerry Blue belonging to Beckett's mother that he used to walk in Croghan, claims that Krapp's "vision" is connected to an epiphany Beckett himself experienced in 1946 either at the end of the Dun Laoghair pier or on a small jetty jutting at Killiney Harbour, and claims that the scene of Krapp's mother's death mirrors the death of Beckett's mother, just to name a few (see Cronin 29-30, 233, 358-359, 407 and Knowlson 300-301, 318-319, 346-347, 399).

Dublin International Theatre Festival.<sup>107</sup> At stake in this act of protest are not only issues of artistic freedom of expression but of how communities, particularly national communities, shape and understand their self-history. Contextualized in this way, the Irish connections of *Krapp's Last Tape's* begin to take on particular significance, especially in relation to the play's concern with self-representation and with the preservation and presentation of the past as a means of asserting selfhood in the present.

While I hesitate from positing *Krapp's Last Tape* as a direct and explicit critique of the Irish Literary Revival at this point in my argument,<sup>108</sup> Beckett's play and the Revival overlap in significant ways. While Krapp may at some points appear as a figure for the aged Romantic poet, he also, as critics have noted, invokes the notion of the Irish storyteller, albeit a particularly modern and isolated iteration of this figure. With his dirty white boots, ill-fitting clothes, and initial clown-like red nose,<sup>109</sup> Friedman sees Krapp, along with Gogo, Didi, and Pozzo, as a descendent of "the stereotypical wandering performer of Irish tradition," who is an outcast loner, a

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<sup>107</sup>In fact, this incident with the Dublin International Theatre Festival just precedes and overlaps with the composition of *Krapp's Last Tape*, which, according to James Knowlson's biography, Beckett began writing on February 20, 1958, and completed in March of that year (Knowlson 399). Beckett wrote Alan Simpson, who was scheduled to run a production of *Endgame* and a reading of the radio play *All that Fall* at the Pike Theater in Dublin, of his decision concerning the ban on February 17, 1958. The details behind the ban run thus: The Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, refused to deliver the opening blessing for the festival because he disapproved of O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* and the *Ulysses* stage adaptation. To placate the archbishop, the festival organizers dropped the Joyce adaptation, and requested so many alterations to O'Casey's script that he withdrew. Beckett responded by not only withdrawing his own mime performances from the festival, but by banning the production of any of his plays in Ireland. As he explained in a letter to Carolyn Swift, the wife of Alan Simpson: "I am withdrawing altogether. As long as such conditions prevail in Ireland I do not wish my work to be performed there, either in festivals or outside of them. If no protest is heard they will prevail there forever. This is the strongest I can make...I hope you will forgive me" (qtd. Knowlson 401-402).

<sup>108</sup> Beckett's relationship with the Irish Literary Revival and its inheritors is complicated. While he was friends and supported the work of Irish poets like Thomas MacGreevy, he was extremely critical of other writers and currents within the movement. In his 1934 essay "Recent Irish Poetry," Beckett specifically names W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge as among the movement's "antiquarians" or "thermolaters," who promote an idealized notion of the past and do not seem to acknowledge the problematic relationship between subject and object in any endeavor of representation (Beckett, "Recent" 70).

<sup>109</sup> Beckett downplayed the "clownish" aspects of Krapp's appearance in later performances.

vagabond, and often a fool (Friedman 126). Finding a similar connection between the traditional Irish storyteller and Krapp, Maurice Harmon points out, “One of the most poignant images in Irish storytelling is of the teller of tales who no longer has an audience and therefore must tell his stories over and over to himself” (Harmon, “Introduction” xiv). I would add a third figure to this string of associations by pointing out that Krapp also shares significant commonalities with many of the revivalists. If one wanted to start at the most basic level, Krapp shares a common Anglo-Irish heritage with many revivalists, including Yeats and Synge,<sup>110</sup> a heritage he reveals in early versions of the play where he sings the Anglican hymn “Now the Day is Over.” Of course, it must be acknowledged that Beckett himself was Anglo-Irish as well, but other substantial similarities exist between Krapp, Yeats, and Synge.

Krapp shares with revivalists a desire to bring the past into the present as part of a process of establishing and preserving identity, and his apparent conviction that the spoken word, or a reproduction thereof, is the most efficacious means through which this project can be accomplished. He also shares with the revivalists an obsessive fascination with notions of origins and community, even if this community consists of connecting with one other person. Krapp’s taped narrations frequently return to figures that invoke these ideas. His mother and the dark nurse with the perambulator invoke both the former and the latter. Other figures – Old Miss McGlome, Bianca, the girl in the shabby green coat, Effie, Fanny, the girl in the punt

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<sup>110</sup> Gregory Castle has argued that being Anglo-Irish puts writers like Yeats and Synge in a curious kind of simultaneous insider/outsider position with regards to the idealized notion of “authentic” Irish culture, which was predominantly Catholic and of the peasant class. Mostly of the upper or middle classes, the Anglo-Irish at times benefited from colonial rule. As Castle points out, the attempts of the revivalists to harken back to an even older, pre-Catholic Irish tradition can be seen as an attempt to make a space for themselves (Castle 3-8). In this process, Castle argues that revivalists often resort to techniques of the ethnographer, and his argument here resonates well with my earlier claim as to how, by asserting their writing imitates speech, revivalists seek to make their own medium and mediating presence transparent (27). For the ethnographer also often seeks to make his own subject position transparent by asserting scientific objectivity.

– each in their own way offer human connection. As the first in this series of female figures, it is significant that Old Miss McGlome is potentially what revivalist discourse would identify as an authentically “Irish” figure, as she hails from Connaught, a western province of Ireland that was the most removed from the effects of English colonization. This province includes the same Aran Islands where, as was mentioned earlier, Yeats sent the young Synge. She too, then, is both a figure of origin, authenticity, and community.

*Krapp’s Last Tape’s* invocation of romantic and revivalist cultural discourses demonstrates their continued influence into the mid-twentieth-century and beyond. The fact that this play features Krapp – the Romantic poet, the Irish storyteller, the literary revivalist – record his spoken narrations draws attention to the ways that these literary and cultural discourses overlap with discourses surrounding audio-technology in the early to mid-twentieth-century. To return to a concept discussed last chapter, one of the premises of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s notion of “remediation” is that technologies define themselves in relation to other media, rather than in relation to the outside world that these media are supposed to represent or mediate (Bolter 28). Certainly, if we look at the advertising surrounding emergent recording technologies since the turn of the century, we can see this principal at work, as aural recording technologies appear to be understood in terms of both speech and writing, promising both the transparency, authenticity, and authority of the spoken word and writing’s ability to fix, preserve, and transport meaning.

Examples of early recording technologies that make such promises about speech abound. Perhaps the most commonly recognized icon of early twentieth-



century audio technology advertising is “His Master’s Voice,” the trademark image of the Victor Talking Machine Company in the United States and the Gramophone Company in the United Kingdom. The image, originally a painting by Francis Barraud, features a dog looking quizzically into the cone of a gramophone. Taken together, the title and image convey the idea that the machine produces not just a reproduction of speech, but a reproduction of such quality that it invokes the presence and authority of its originary body (in this case, the dog’s master.) Another contemporary image, equally evocative, was associated with the Edison Disc Phonograph. This image featured a young woman standing next to a disc phonograph player, with the caption “Comparison with the living artist reveals no difference.” Here it is the audio technology itself that claims to become transparent, or to be interchangeable with the flesh and blood woman standing next to it.<sup>111</sup>

Yet these early recording technologies, like the later invention of the tape recorder, which we have onstage with Krapp, are at heart inscription based, as they transform sound waves into a kind of writing.<sup>112</sup> Advertisements for the tape recorder, which promised to be more durable and have greater storage capacity than a phonograph or gramophone, often emphasize its preservation function. This technology makes sound, like writing, preservable and transportable. Early suggested uses for tape recorders in European advertisements of the 1950s include family sound

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<sup>111</sup> Interested readers can find an example of an advertisement image of “His Master’s Voice” in Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003) on page 302. This example is for the Victor Talking Machine Company, but similar images were used by the Gramophone Company in the U. K. An image of the Edison advertisement can be found on the website of the Rutgers University *Edison Papers* collection <<http://edison.rutgers.edu/phonograph.htm>>.

<sup>112</sup> Phonographs and gramophones transform sound into transcription by having a stylus attached to a diaphragm that picks up sound vibrations. When the diaphragm vibrates, the stylus records the vibrations on a surface typically covered with wax or foil. The tape recorder translates sound into magnetic impulses that leave their mark on a specially treated tape. Early tapes were made of steel, but in the mid-1930s film became the preferred material. For a brief history of the tape recorder and an explanation of how it works, see Hayles article “Voices out of Bodies, Bodies Out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity” pages 76-78.

albums (similar to a photo album), dictation, and letter writing. These advertisements, as well as the guidebooks that came with the recorders, not only emphasized that the tape recorder was like writing or a photograph, but better because sound carried more meaning. As one advertisement claims, sound “remains vivacious and binds people together more forcefully than pictures” (qtd. Bijsterveld 29). Another states, sound “may engulf and entirely absorb you again; you do not only hear it again, you *experience* it all over” (qtd. 29, italics in original). The tape recorder promises the immediacy of speech, coupled with the permanence and transportability of writing. Interestingly, the three uses listed above for the tape recorder found in advertisements all in their own way fit Krapp’s use of the device. Obviously, Krapp’s collection of recordings is a dictation, but it is also like a photo album insofar as it captures specific individual episodes or scenes in the hopes of reviving them later. Krapp’s recordings are also in a way letters to his audience – that is, his future selves – a point driven home by the fact that part of Krapp’s yearly ritual appears to be taking notes beforehand on an envelope.

### **Language, Technology, and the Body: Beckett’s Hypermediate Theater**

*Krapp’s Last Tape* thus engages a layered set of discourses regarding the spoken word, its relation to other mediums, and the logic of immediacy. Krapp’s choice to narrate and record his memories highlights assumptions concerning the transparency, spontaneity, authenticity and authority of the spoken word prevalent in romantic and revivalist discourses, as well as similar ideas as they were expressed in discourses surrounding emergent recording technology. However, the overall

deployment of mechanical orality in Beckett's play works in a different direction by emphasizing the *non*transparency of language, whether spoken, written or recorded, while also bringing to the forefront the physical network of communication mediums that constitute human experience.

To begin, Beckett's deployment of mechanical orality undermines the notion that speech carries authority based on its connection to the speaker's body as a point of origin. The use of the tape recorder to play back thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp's narration presents the audience with a voice that both does and does not belong to the body onstage. Of course, by 1958 the kind of severing of the connection between voice and body created by aural-technology would not be stunning or traumatic in the way it would have been in the late nineteenth century when audio recording or transmission technologies were new. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, however, Beckett amplifies the separation of voice from body, making it stand out even for the technology-inundated audiences of today. One of the ways Beckett accomplishes this amplification is by acutely emphasizing the material, bodily presence of the aged and decrepit sixty-nine-year-old Krapp. The first few minutes of the play run almost like one of Beckett's mime performances. There are no words, but a heavy emphasis on sound, particularly bodily sounds, as Krapp grunts, sighs, drinks, smacks his lips, and claps his hands. When this onstage Krapp finally speaks – "Ah! [...] Box...three...spool...five" – his voice, which Beckett's stage directions specifically describe as "*Cracked*" with a "*Distinctive intonation*," matches a body (Beckett, *Krapp's* 56, 55). The fact that this body produces this voice is then further emphasized by Krapp's lingering enjoyment of the word "Spooool" (56). This unit of

matched voice and body is then juxtaposed with the voice on the tape, which Beckett designates as “*Strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp’s at an earlier time*” (57).<sup>113</sup> The voice on the tape clearly does not belong to the body onstage, even as it is Krapp’s voice. This voice on the tape has a different kind of presence than the embodied Krapp. As this voice refers to his narration as a “retrospect,” we might call the voice itself a retro-specter, a kind of ghost of the past in the present, a present-absence (58).

Another way that *Krapp’s Last Tape* amplifies the separation of voice from the body as a point of origin and authority is by capitalizing on the capacity of the tape recorder for repetition. As Krapp plays and replays his tapes over the course of the evening, the narrative structure of *Krapp’s Last Tape* is guided by a principle of repetition rather than teleology. This repetition introduces a curious crossroads of sameness and difference that ultimately unhinges the idea that the words on the tape either draw meaning from their point (or body) of original utterance or that they can transparently communicate some sort of original intention or meaning. Several critics have noted that sixty-nine-year-old Krapp’s responses to the reflections of his thirty-nine-year-old self demonstrate how the same phrase, when repeated in a different context, can take on a different meaning (Connor 129; Hayles 81).<sup>114</sup> One place

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<sup>113</sup> The fact that Beckett clearly intended a juxtaposition between the two voices on stage is further evidenced in his January 4, 1960, letter to Alan Schneider. In this letter, he mentions that another director, Donald McWhinnie, pointed out to him that voices don’t necessarily age in the same way that other parts of the body do. Beckett’s response is to reassert that the recorded voice “should be spoken obviously in a much younger and stronger voice than Krapp’s [...] but unmistakably his” (Harmon, *No* 59).

<sup>114</sup> Steven Connor’s *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, Text* (1988) provides one of the earliest, most comprehensive, and oft-cited Derridean readings of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. As the reader will see as this section progresses, many currents of his argument align with my own conclusions. However, our readings diverge when it comes to the notion of “presence” and mediation in theater, as will be seen by the end of this chapter section.

where this difference is apparent is when sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp listens to thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp talk about his even younger self:

Hard to believe I was ever as bad as that young whelp. The voice!  
Jesus! And the aspirations! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] And  
the resolutions! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] To drink less, in  
particular. [*Brief laugh of KRAPP alone*]. (Beckett, *Krapp's* 58)

The divergence between the responses of the sixty-nine-year-old and thirty-nine-year-old Krapps demonstrates that the same words carry a different meaning for Krapp in a different time and context. Indeed, sixty-nine-year-old Krapp goes on to engage in a pitiless judgment of his thirty-nine-year-old self for his vain ambition and narcissism, a self-evaluation that the younger Krapp certainly does not seem to recognize.

This idea is even more starkly conveyed in instances where the tape recorder replays the same passage multiple times. Krapp's replaying of the scene with the girl on the punt is by far the longest and most prominent of these passages. Parts of this passage are played three times. Krapp stumbles upon a small segment after fast-forwarding through his grandiose description of his "vision at last," then rewinds to listen to the passage in full. He listens to the passage in full again at the end of the play, after he abruptly ends his sixty-ninth birthday narrative. While the passage played obviously remains the same, Krapp's response to the passage differs significantly between the two full repetitions. For the first repetition, Krapp maintains the same "*listening posture*" – seated with elbows on the table, leaning over the tape recorder cupping his ear – that he has assumed for listening to the recorder throughout (Beckett, *Krapp* 61). In later productions, Beckett annotated his stage directions to

stipulate that, as he listens to the full recording of this passage for the first time, Krapp gradually lowers his head to rest his head upon the table or on the tape recorder itself (Beckett, *Theatrical* 8). The second time he plays the full passage, however, Krapp listens differently. He stares front in a way that echoes the silent staring position the audience first saw Krapp in when lights came up onstage at the beginning of the play.<sup>115</sup> In the scripts for some of the earlier productions, including the first, Krapp silently moves his lips without sound, an act that was dropped in later productions where Krapp is designated as “*dead still till end*” (10). These varied responses demonstrate that the passage of the recording has changed in meaning for Krapp, if only slightly. Certainly, they have changed in meaning for the audience, which hears the passage again in the context of Krapp’s differing response. As with other instances of recorded repetition throughout *Krapp’s Last Tape*, these examples show that the recorded word does not provide transparent access to originary meaning, because meaning is determined not at the point of origin or utterance but at the moment and in the context of reception.

Borrowing a term from Derrida, Steven Connor argues that Beckett’s deployment of the tape recorder in this fashion draws attention to the “citationality” of all language, meaning that every utterance is both a repetition and possesses the potential to be repeated in a different context with a different meaning (Connor 127). While this principal may at first seem to apply most clearly to recorded language, the

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<sup>115</sup> The 1973 Royal Court production in London used editions of *Krapp’s Last Tape* hand annotated by Beckett. One stipulates that Krapp listens to the final recitation of the scene on the punt “*absolutely still from now till end. Sitting almost upright, turned away from T.R. [tape-recorder], staring before him. Enough now to overhear dimly familiar text. Hears nothing after ‘side to side’. Absolutely frozen still throughout*” (Beckett, *Theatrical* 37). In another of the annotated editions, Beckett stipulates that Krapp “*sits to listen, not in L.P. [listening position] but as when discovered. Dead still till end*” (37). These annotations further emphasize that Krapp that the scene with the girl on the punt means something different to Krapp the second time he listens to the full recording.

repetition enacted by the tape recorder is arguably only a highlight within a larger pattern of repetition that suffuses *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Certainly, Krapp engages in numerous repetitive actions over the course of the play - checking his watch, peeling and eating bananas in exactly the same fashion, orbiting back to his cubby for a drink. The very acts of listening and recording that constitute the “event” of the play are a ritual repeated yearly. More than this, much of Krapp’s narration is repetition of language from elsewhere. Nearly a third of the lines spoken by sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp are read or a song. Both sixty-nine and thirty-nine-year-old-Krapps use clichés in their narrations – “the little rascal,” “sound as a bell,” “separating the grain from the husks” – just to name a few (Beckett, *Krapp's* 56-57). Sixty-nine-year-old Krapp repeats, or cites, his thirty-nine-year-old-self when narrating his annual recording, with lines like “The eyes she had!”, “Lie down across her,” and, in later productions, “The voice! Jesus!” (Beckett, *Krapp's* 62, 63; *Theatrical*, 9).<sup>116</sup> As Connor points out, Krapp’s “life comes to seem less like a logically continuous series of discrete utterances, each located in its intentional context, than a web of mutually enveloping, self-quoting moments, each endlessly displaced from its originating context, regrafted elsewhere” (Connor 130). In a way not just Krapp’s taped narrations, but all of his utterances and actions are recorded (or re-corded, tied in to a new context) as they are repetitions and/or potential repetitions.

Such an interpretation diminishes the assumed differences between speech and writing discussed earlier, drawing them closer together not through a transference of authority, but by undermining the premises upon which this authority is based.

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<sup>116</sup> This repetition of “The voice! Jesus!” towards the beginning of sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp’s recorded narration was added by Beckett to the 1970 Royal Court production, for which Beckett provided script annotations, and the 1975 Théâtre d’Orsay production (Beckett, *Theatrical* 34).

Speech does not provide transparent access to an origin that determines meaning. Speech is also not necessarily more spontaneous or natural than writing. In fact, Krapp clearly plans his narrations beforehand, as jotting down notes on an envelope seems to be part of the overall birthday ritual. These written notes precede and direct Krapp's speech. Moreover, the numerous pauses and hesitations that occur throughout Krapp's narration emphasize that he is aware that he is engaged in a performance this is being recorded for future ears. He is choosing his words carefully.

At the same time, it is not just assumptions concerning speech that Beckett's play calls into question. It also undermines the notion that writing is permanent, that it can somehow fix meaning or a moment in time. When Krapp reads his written index, he can't remember "Memorable equinox", or the "black ball" that the audience later hears thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp claim he shall feel in his hand "until my dying day" (Beckett, *Krapp's 60*). By listening to his tapes, Krapp does regain context that helps him (and the audience) understand these references. However, his recorded narrations, which according to discourses surrounding audio-recording technology are supposed to have a similar ability as writing to preserve meaning, present the same kind of problem. When the sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp hears his younger self speak the word "viduity," he cannot remember what the word means. Just as Krapp's confusion as to the meaning of the written words "memorable equinox" and "black ball" must be resolved by consulting the recorded speech of the tapes, the question of the meaning of "viduity" leads Krapp to consult the written text of the dictionary. This pursuit of meaning, while it does provide a definition of the term "viduity," leads not to a final, determinate endpoint, but instead opens new questions and new



avenues of meaning that could be followed further. After reading the definition aloud – “State – or condition – of being – or remaining – a widow – or widower” – Krapp puzzles over the potential different inflections of meaning of certain words – “Being – or remaining?” – which he could have decided to look up and parse out in turn (59). He also encounters the word in an apparently metaphoric context – “Deep weeds of viduity” – and as it has become applied to a type of bird that has a long, black plume, like a mourning veil, and hence is called “The vidua-bird!” (59).

After this brief interruption to consult the dictionary, Krapp returns to listening to his tape, but his tracing out of the meaning of “viduity,” with its potential to have been pursued further, could be said to illustrate Derrida’s notion of the play of signs, that is, the idea that words have no final endpoint of meaning, but rather have meaning only in relation to other language. Thus to pursue meaning is to trace an endless chain of associations.<sup>117</sup> However, I would argue that the fact that this pursuit of linguistic meaning in *Krapp’s Last Tape* takes us from writing to embodied speech and recorded speech, from recorded speech to writing (which is read, questioned, and responded to aloud), conveys the notion not just of a play of signs, but also a play of physical mediums.<sup>118</sup> For, as Kittler points out, we encounter language always in a

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<sup>117</sup> As Derrida explains in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences,” originally a talk delivered in 1966, with regards to “the center” or final endpoint of meaning of a word or system: “The center is the center of totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*...Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse...” (Derrida, “Structure” 109-110). Derrida returns to this idea of the play of signs again and again in his work.

<sup>118</sup> Bolter and Grusin make a similar point with regards to the physicality of language: “The process of remediation makes us aware that all media are at one level a ‘play of signs,’ which is a lesson we take from poststructuralist literary theory. At the same time, this process insists on the real, effective presence of media in our culture. Media have the same claim to reality as more tangible cultural artifacts; photographs, films, and computer applications are as real as airplanes and buildings” (Bolter 19).

physical form – as embodied speech, as writing, as a recording. Thus, Kittler argues, it makes little sense to talk of language as a system independent of its medium.<sup>119</sup>

Speech, both embodied and recorded, and writing are fluid and interdependent in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Just as Krapp chases linguistic-meaning from one medium to the next in an effort to understand and recapture his recorded memories, the spoken and written word also mingle in their production for, as was noted earlier, Krapp bases his narrations on notes written on envelopes. Embodied and recorded speech and writing are parts of an overarching and omnipresent network of media that constitutes Krapp's environment and his experience of it. In fact, Krapp himself is part of this network, insofar as the play highlights Krapp's body as itself a medium of communication and interpretation. As was mentioned earlier, Krapp's "*Cracked voice*" and "*Distinctive intonation*" tie his spoken words to his aged body as the source of speech production (Beckett, *Krapp's* 55). Krapp's verbal play – his pauses and drawing out of syllables as he, to use Krapp's own term, "revels"<sup>120</sup> in enunciation – have a similar effect. At the same time, Krapp's own perceptual handicaps – his difficulties seeing and hearing – draw attention to the fact that reading and listening are physical acts based in a body that interacts with the mediums around it. He must peer closely at the pages of his index and dictionary to make out the text; he must lean over the tape recorder, and in some performances even cup his ear, to hear the voice of his younger self. The audience, who watches Krapp's reactions to

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<sup>119</sup> The idea is a basic presupposition of Kittler's *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900* (1985). In his introduction to this text, David E. Welbery refers to it as Kittler's "presupposition of exteriority," the idea that a notation system (i.e. language) has the exteriority of technology (Wellbery xii).

<sup>120</sup> Sixty-nine-year-old Krapp reports in his recorded narration: "Revelled in the word spool. [*With relish.*] Happiest moment of the past half million" (Beckett, *Krapp's* 62).

his taped narrations, at once sees Krapp's body as a field of reception and a guide for its own interpretation. Pierre Chabert, a French actor who performed the role of Krapp under Beckett's direction for a 1975 production at the Théâtre d'Orsay, remarked on how Beckett's play presents Krapp's body as itself a kind of medium:

The dramatic success of *Krapp's last tape* [...] is dependent upon Krapp's position, immobile, tensely listening to his voice. [...] When Krapp listens and does not speak the infinite nuances of emotion, anger or despair are registered on his face. In separating the voice from the face, Beckett effectively makes the act of listening a hearing of the voice by the body. The body becomes the sensitive receptacle upon which the voice engraves itself, a kind of human tape recorder.

(Chabert 27-28)

While Chabert's metaphor may not work perfectly (Krapp may engage in many repetitious acts onstage, but I do not think we could say he is rewound and played back with the same accuracy as a tape), it does vividly draw attention to the way that Krapp's body is a medium of reception and communication that is itself enmeshed in a larger media network. In a way, Beckett's play makes the body itself hypermediate, just as it makes the rest of the media network that constitutes language hypermediate – that is, it makes them opaque rather than transparent and highlights the omnipresence of mediation. This is an entirely different approach to language and language media than the ones displayed by the romantic and revivalist authors examined earlier, whose authority stemmed from their claims of speech's

transparency and authenticity, which they in turn transferred to their own speech-imitating writing.

This recognition of the way in which *Krapp's Last Tape* makes visible the networks of media that produce and transmit language, including the body as part of this network, has important implications for the medium of the play's own production, the theater. As Connor points out, the theater as a medium often lays claim to authority based on notions of transparency and origins. The authority of the theater, particularly in comparison to written genres like the novel, lies in the fact that theater "represents human beings with the actual bodies of other human beings, and it represents spoken words with words spoken by those actual human beings" (Connor 126). Such a notion that theater provides more authentic access to the persons or events represented reflects a desire for transparency, for immediacy, not so different from the desire expressed by Krapp in making his recordings. However, Krapp's attempts to preserve and access his past through the spoken word, to record and recapture some of those memories so they can be experienced again in their full physicality, are constantly interrupted by and are at odds with the play's foregrounding of media.

One might say that in undercutting notions of the transparency and immediacy of speech, Beckett has undercut the very claims that invest the theater with efficacy and authority; however, from another perspective, Beckett's emphasis on the physicality of the body, on the primacy of the space of reception as the site of meaning production, is an affirmation. Towards the end of his analysis of *Krapp's Last Tape*, Connor makes the following statement: "By the end of the play with the

displacement of the breathing, visible Krapp by the voice of another absent Krapp, the theater has been transformed from a place of being to a place of writing” (Connor 131). Under the Derridean frame that Connor has been guided by throughout his reading, which aligns “being” with presence and “writing” with absence, Connor posits Beckett’s theater as a space of evacuation. However, in later productions, the last image left with the audience is not of an onstage Krapp displaced by a recorded voice, it is the single red light of the tape recorder, which glows after the rest of the stage has cut to darkness and silence. The last image is of a physical medium. Beckett’s theater is not an evacuated space, it is a mediated space, where meaning is traced endlessly through media, and through the medium of theater itself.

### **Fragmentation, Networks, and Hybrids: Speaking the Postmodern Subject**

In this last section, I want to push this notion of “network” farther. Beckett’s emphasis on foregrounding mediation and on demonstrating that the body itself is part of a larger media network also has implications for how this play narrates the human subject. The privileging of speech, and of writing that imitates speech, in romantic and revivalist discourses is based in the notion of a stable, discrete, and coherent subject. This subject acts either as a point of origin, speaking or writing of his own experiences in the world, or a point of translation, as he takes the authentic Irish quality of the speech he listens to and transmutes it into writing to be accessed by a broader audience. *Krapp’s Last Tape*, however, fundamentally challenges this notion of the human subject, and it does so in such a way that both engages and is at odds with modernist notions of the subject, pushing towards a postmodern

formulation of subjectivity. *Krapp's Last Tape* presents a storytelling subject of uncertain coherence, who is at once fragmented and networked. The tension that surrounds Krapp's attempts to narrate a self is thus not a binary between wholeness and fissure, but a more complicated conflict between wholeness, fragmentation (a notion that presupposes a whole to be broken up), and a kind of postmodern boundlessness.

*Krapp's Last Tape* clearly presents us with a fragmented subject who is unable to draw and keep together his various "selves." Many critics have noted how the use of the tape recorder multiplies the number of Krapps onstage over the course of the performance (Gilbert 249; Hayles 81; Rodríguez-Gago 202). I would argue that there are in fact three Krapps, each of which is differently present for both the audience and Krapp himself. There is a fully embodied sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp, who speaks, plays, and listens to his tapes; there is the thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp who exists as a voice that issues from the tape recorder and is unconnected to a visible body; and there is the Krapp in his late-twenties who exists only as a linguistic creation, who is present only insofar as he is talked about, but not as a visible body that the audience can see or an audible voice to be heard. The older Krapp is often critical and contemptuous of his younger selves; yet at certain points within the play, Krapp also demonstrates the desire to bring these various selves, to bring his past and present, into a kind of alignment. This desire is evident in the embodied Krapp's interactions with his recorded tapes. When the thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp on the tape contemplates what he means by "the grain" or "those things worth having when all the dust has settled," stating "I close my eyes and try to imagine them," the listening

sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp closes his eyes as well to share in this vision (Beckett, *Krapp's 57*, 57, 58). Similarly, when the thirty-nine-year-old-Krapp mocks and laughs at his even younger late-twenties-self, the oldest listening Krapp laughs along. However, inevitably the oldest Krapp finds himself laughing at, rather than with, his thirty-nine-year-old, narrating self, demonstrating that their unity is fleeting and incomplete.

Krapp's recording of his "last" tape near the end of the play perhaps most blatantly highlights both Krapp's occasional longings to, to borrow a phrase from Friedman, "reconnect his divided selves," by affectively re-experiencing his past (or the past as he remembers it) and the impossibility of him ever fully doing so (Friedman 129). Just before he ends his recording in frustration, Krapp laments his fixation on the past and his desire to re-experience, through memory, certain lost moments of his life:

Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. [*Pause.*] Lie propped up in the dark – and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. [*Pause.*] Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. [*Pause.*] And so on. [*Pause.*] Be again, be again. [*Pause.*] All that old misery. [*Pause.*] Once wasn't enough for you. (63)

Krapp's rhythmical self-admonishment to "be again" is itself a kind of contradiction, an insoluble opposition. The notion of "being" fully in a moment, fully immersed in an experience, is at odds with the idea "again," which signifies repetition. To "be

again” is to have a sense of doubleness, different from “being” for the first time. As we can see from Krapp’s use of the second person to talk to and about himself, Krapp’s inability to bridge the split between his current state and the past he is so obsessed with has now slipped into a splitting of his subjectivity in the present. He cannot “be” present and in the past.

N. Katherine Hayles argues that this fragmented subjectivity exemplifies the postmodern subject. As Hayles explains, “Fractured by temporal dislocations and riven by disconcerting metamorphoses, this evolving subjectivity [i.e. the postmodern subjectivity] emerges from the instabilities produced when voices are taken out of bodies and bodies find themselves out of voices” (Hayles 75). While it is true that *Krapp’s Last Tape* pushes us towards notions of the postmodern subject, I would argue that this kind of fracturing, and the concern and anxiety it produces, is in fact fundamentally modernist. Beckett’s play provides its audience with a more literal performance of the kind of fragmentation that accompanies self-narration, which we saw in Woolf’s *The Waves* during the scene where Bernard is at university. In this scene, Bernard imagines himself as “like-Byron”,<sup>121</sup> writing a letter to a young woman he is interested in, and narrates a story in which he visits the country home of this young lady and meets her father. In both acts - the letter writing and the storytelling - Bernard’s attempt at self-narration is thwarted by his anxiety. Bernard attributes this anxiety to his lack of audience - to the fact that he is both the teller and the audience and the object of his story. However, it is also an anxiety caused by the way that his self-narrations split his sense of selfhood. Bernard is at once storyteller,

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<sup>121</sup> The fact that the specific poet Bernard imagines himself as the romantic poet “Byron” and that Krapp’s narrations also invoke the figure of the romantic poet is no coincidence, as both are challenging the romantic notion of the stable and coherent subject.



subject, and audience. This leaves Bernard with the question "which of these people am I?"

Beckett's play and this scene from Woolf's text both feature an isolated storytelling individual who narrates his own story. Both take place in similar pseudo-storytelling settings, with Woolf's Bernard talking over a dead fire, and Beckett's Krapp playing and listening to his tape recorder in a pool of light cast by his hanging desk lamp. Both settings highlight the storyteller's solitariness, and ask the audience to consider the difference between the scene we are given and the traditional scene of oral storytelling where there are other people present. Beckett's play exteriorizes Bernard's internal split through its use of the tape recorder.

While on the one hand, Beckett's play thus presents us with a character whose subjectivity is innately and inevitably fragmented by the act of self-narration, at the same time from another perspective this subjectivity could be said to be not fractured but unbounded and dispersed – that is, networked. Earlier in this chapter we discussed how Krapp's body functions as part of a larger network of media. Here I am proposing that this network constitutes not just Krapp's environment, but that it constitutes Krapp. Throughout this project I have focused on self-narrators in order to explore the connections modernist writers find between storytelling and the process of subject formation. This play presents a self-narration explicitly produced not by an oral storyteller alone but by a combination of a human speaker and inorganic machine. Each to some extent exercises control over the other and the tale presented. Krapp controls what the tape plays, but only to a limited extent, since he can't instantly locate the passage he desires, but instead must fast-forward and rewind in an

approximate fashion. The passages that Krapp hits upon while looking for the episode about the girl on the punt become part of his self-narration, as do his responses to these passages. The tape instigates these responses – facial expressions, laughter, grunts of disapproval or frustration, etc. – that in turn become part of the narrative and affect the audience. Moreover, the tape recorder itself, as well as other forms of media that the tape recorder draws upon, help determine both what is recorded and how it is recorded. If Krapp, as was pointed out earlier, plans his narrations out beforehand, he does so with the particular media of oral performance, the tape recorder, letter, and even memoir in mind. If the media help shape the storytelling and, as I have argued, the storytelling constitutes the subject, then these media help shape the subject as well.

Such an intermingling of storytelling and agency makes it difficult to delineate exactly what the relationship between Krapp and the machine is, and where the line is separating them. This sense of the blurring of the boundaries between Krapp and his machine, between organic human and inorganic technology, is heightened when we reflect on how they are presented onstage. Indeed, Krapp's tape recorder is simultaneously self and other. It has Krapp's young voice (which is no longer his) and his memories. Beckett stipulated to Pierre Chabert that over the course of the performance, he should "Become as much as possible one with the machine" (qtd. Friedman 129). At the same time, the way that Krapp interacts with the tape recorder, and its spools, marks them at times as a kind of other, a kind of company. He calls the fifth spool when he finally finds it "the little rascal;" he cradles the tape

recorder in his arms while listening for the first time to the full episode of the girl on the punt, as if the machine could stand in for the lost lover's feminine body.

Ulrika Maude points out that the tape recorder serves as a kind of prosthesis for Krapp, as a superior kind of memory that supplements the inadequacies or enhances the abilities of his human body (Maude 64-65). With this in mind, it is clear that like other prosthetic enhancements, such as metal replacements of limbs or of joints, the tape recorder both is and is not part of Krapp's body, blurring the line between organic and inorganic, introducing the notion that our onstage Krapp is something akin to Bruno Latour's idea of a "hybrid," that is a network that refuses to fit into accepted categories of human or non-human, of nature or culture, through which the modern world understands and defines itself (Latour 10-12).

### **Conclusions**

Through its deployment of mechanical orality, *Krapp's Last Tape* does not just undercut the idea that spoken language provides transparent access to and draws authority and meaning from its point of origin, but it fundamentally challenges the concept of the stable, unified subject itself. Through the various Krapps it presents onstage and the demonstrated inability of sixty-nine-year-old-Krapp to reconcile them, Beckett's play invokes a modernist notion of the fragmented subject. More than this, however, it simultaneously forces us to regard subjectivity as a networked phenomenon, and of Krapp himself as a potential hybrid. It is this networking and potential hybridity that pushes *Krapp's Last Tape* towards postmodernism, for the

simultaneity of these possible formulations creates a sense of ontological uncertainty identified by Brian McHale as a dominant feature of postmodernism (McHale 6-11).

Moreover, when we look back to earlier works explored in this project, we can begin to see a shift from how the authority of the oral storyteller is presented, negotiated, undermined, shuffled, and/or reclaimed by writers of the early to mid-twentieth century. In chapter two, I showed how Conrad challenges the imperial narrator, whose authority is based upon the notion of firsthand experience, that is the idea that the storyteller has seen certain places and events firsthand, as opposed to learning about them in books. Conrad undercuts this authority by highlighting how human perception is circumvented by cultural narratives, so that even firsthand accounts cannot be taken as transparent transmissions of truth independent of culture. *Krapp's Last Tape*, in comparison, undercuts the authority of the storyteller not by his drawing perceptions into question, but by undercutting the coherence and stability of the subject who is supposed to perceive. This too is a movement towards postmodernism, where the fundamental question becomes not, "How do I know truth?" but "What is this 'I' that constitutes the grounds of this question?"

Before concluding, I want to briefly return to my earlier discussion of the relation between orality in Beckett's play and the notion of orality presented by certain writers from the Irish Literary Revival, particularly Yeats and Synge. In the section on cultural contexts for *Krapp's Last Tape*, I briefly alluded to an anecdote shared by Synge in his "Preface" to *The Playboy of the Western World*, where he asserts the authentic roots of his playwriting by describing himself preparing to write *The Shadows Glen* by listening to the talk of servant girls through a hole in the floor

above the kitchen. While Synge appears to only appreciate this story as a demonstration of the value and ethic behind his work, Synge's literal position in the house, as he eavesdrops from above, also reflects the social and economic hierarchy that allows him to commandeer the supposed authenticity of these women's speech – granted to them by Synge in the first place – without either their knowledge of being overhead or their consent to being object of study. They are primitivized by Synge, as are the “country people of Ireland” whose language is both privileged, again as authentic and spontaneous, and placed on equal level to the language Synge remembers being spoken in his nursery (v). Synge's “Preface” thus reveals that, although the mission behind the Irish Literary Revival is ostensibly to elevate and instill pride in an Irish national identity in defiance of colonial rule, at least within certain corners of the Irish Literary Revival this mission is executed in such a way that maintains a power hierarchy where some members of the Irish community are rendered voiceless (even as they are apparently valued for their authentic speech).

Contextualized in this way, Beckett's deployment of mechanical orality not only opens into explorations of postmodern subjectivity, but that it provides grounds for thinking of *Krapp's Last Tape* as a postcolonial text. *Krapp's Last Tape* challenges specific cultural mythologies that play a role in perpetuating oppressive hierarchies of power. It challenges the notion that the spoken word is more authentic, more transparent than writing; indeed, *Krapp's Last Tape* fundamentally challenges the notions of authenticity and origins in the first place. Old Miss McGlome, the first of the female figures that Krapp recalls to embody these qualities, invokes the stereotype of the Irish peasant, and even potentially, with a nod to the figure of

Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Ireland itself. However, Krapp tells the audience that McGlome is from “Connaught, I *fancy*” (Beckett, *Krapp’s* 58, italics mine). I find that “fancy” particularly significant, hinting at a kind of constructedness behind this figure of authentic Irish origins. In fact, each of the other female figures in Krapp’s narrations are, in their various ways, absent-presences – his mother dies; Bianca and the girl in the shabby green coat have left him; the dark nurse invokes both life and death with her “funeral” black pram; even Fanny is a “bony old ghost of a whore” (62). Beckett undermines the notion of the authenticity of speech and the notion that speech connects listeners to an origin of meaning. In all his work, he subverts authenticity and origins. In so doing, he effectively challenges nationalistic systems of belief that rely upon such ideas.

**Coda**  
**Telling Tales of What's to Come:**  
**Thoughts on Orality in a Postmodern Context**

Saleem Sinai, the telepathic protagonist of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), has a picture hanging on the blue wall of his childhood bedroom that brings us back full circle to the beginning of this project. It is a copy of Millais' "The Boyhood of Raleigh," the late nineteenth-century painting of a weathered sailor telling a story to two young boys, one of whom is the future explorer Sir Walter Raleigh. In the context of our discussion of Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*, I posited this painting as a depiction of the "imperial narrator," a central figure from the literature of empire whose univocal tales play a fundamental role in perpetuating ideologies that justify colonization. The imperial narrator, I argued, draws his authority from claiming direct, firsthand experience, from the fact that he has been to and seen far away lands for himself. Thus, even when his narration is written, the imperial narrator invokes a notion of the oral, for his body and bodily experience validate his tale.

Rushdie's novel presents Millais' painting as a complex pictorial narrative, one that is situated within several "frames" that overlay, undermine, and/or build upon each other. As the narrator of Rushdie's novel, Saleem weaves the painting into the story he tells about the childhood of his grandfather, Aadam Aziz. Saleem posits young Raleigh as his grandfather and the weathered sailor (who Saleem thinks of as a fisherman) as Tai, an old, illiterate ferryman whose oral stories enrapture young

Aadam despite parental disapproval.<sup>122</sup> Tai and his “magical talk” invoke familiar notions associating the oral with folklore and tradition (Rushdie 10). In telling his story, Saleem superimposes the images of the sailor in the Millais painting pointing “out to sea as he told his fishy tales” with the image of Tai, “forecasting the fisherman on my wall,” pointing to the Kashmiri mountains as a reference to indicate how old he claims to be. As Saleem tells the reader, however, the copy of the painting itself hangs on his wall next to a framed letter, the letter Saleem receives from the Prime Minister of India because he was born at midnight the day that India became independent of Britain, at the exact moment of India’s independence. Thus, the oral storytelling sailor in the Millais painting pointing to the horizon, who is also the oral storytelling ferryman Tai who both represents and gestures to the past, is by its placement on Saleem’s wall pointing to a *written* document that heralds Saleem as the future of India. The colonial horizon of the imperial narrator is remapped to the potential future of a new nation, an idea that is at once hopeful, but at the same time cannot help but retain residues of the original image and the ideologies with which this image is enmeshed.

Reoriented or, with a nod to our discussion of Rebecca West, re-plotted within the context of Aadam’s childhood in Kashmir and Saleem’s own story, Millais’ painting becomes part of a powerful and complex troping of orality that suffuses Rushdie’s novel. Rushdie’s novel seems to both assert and collapse the difference between orality and writing. The oral storyteller in the Millais painting points to a written document, presenting a possible complication to the traditional notion that

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<sup>122</sup> The oral, as associated with Tai, is both powerful and potentially dangerous, depending on one’s point-of-view. While Tai mesmerizes the young Aadam with stories of how he met Christ, Aadam’s parents, and much of the village, fear Tai as a source of filth and contagion.



writing is supposed to represent and refer back to speech as its point of origin. At the same time, the Millais painting is itself a kind of text. Along similar lines, as narrator, Saleem is reading aloud his story, which he has written, to Padma, an illiterate woman who cares for him. As audience, Padma interrupts to critique and make demands upon Saleem's story, demands that occasionally adhere to what might be seen as traditional rules of oral storytelling, such as linear or causal progression.<sup>123</sup> Orality and writing are thus at times posed as alternative and even competing modes of storytelling; yet at the same time, Rushdie collapses these two modes by incorporating them both into his narration.

Rushdie's engagement with the oral in *Midnight's Children* is a topic worthy of its own chapter, but that tale is for another project. For the purposes of this Coda, this brief discussion of Rushdie's novel is intended merely to demonstrate that modernism does not have the last word on orality. Beckett's postcolonial, proto-postmodern deployment of orality in *Krapp's Last Tape* anticipates manifestations of orality in later twentieth-century texts. As in the modernist texts we have looked at over the course of this project, the oral storytelling scene continues to be a site through which to explore matters concerning how stories ought to be told (as in the debate between Padma and Saleem) and who has authority over a how narratives are transmitted and interpreted (does a colonial or postcolonial reading take precedence in our interpretation of the Millais painting?). Moreover, orality continues to be a means of exploring connections between ideology and embodied identity and the

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<sup>123</sup> Oral storytelling, of course, does not always follow an exact linear progression. As Ong points out, repetitions and formulas, for example, play an important role in making oral stories memorable (Ong 33-36). Writing, however, enables a storyteller to more easily skip forwards and backwards and to engage in digressions, particularly when telling long stories (and Saleem is telling a very long story), since the text is always available for a reader to refer back to. Indeed, Saleem rereads his own story to himself for mistakes, which he notes but does not correct.

relationship between the mode and medium of how stories are told and how human beings understand themselves as individuals and in relation to others.

What then is the status and function of orality in postmodern literature? What makes it different than modernist deployments? Again, these questions might serve as a starting point for another whole project. Here I will merely offer some brief observations and conjectures. Firstly, one difference, I suspect, between modernist and postmodernist deployments of orality ties into new questions concerning the ontological status of the subject. As I argued in my last chapter, the postmodern notion of subjectivity is marked by a kind of networked boundlessness, a notion that raises fundamental questions concerning the boundaries of the body itself. As a traditional marker of interiority and presence, the spoken word becomes a focal point for considering such questions, particularly given that oral/aural technologies capable of reproducing or transmitting voice continue to improve and proliferate over the latter half of the twentieth-century. The dual voices that communicate Krapp's fragmented subjectivity in Beckett's play become the cacophony of voices that the young telepathic Saleem cannot control, although he can attempt to shut them out. Saleem's ability to telepathically 'hear' these voices transforms him into "a sort of radio," as he can tune-in to the thoughts of others, and for a time he acts as a kind of switchboard, a "national network," allowing for the *Midnight's Children's* Conference to convene (189, 259). This cacophony returns with a vengeance at the end of the novel, long after Saleem has lost his mind-reading abilities, along with images of people from his past and of numbers marching, which Saleem foresees tearing him apart and, as he says, "reducing me to specks of voiceless dust" (533).

Of course this disintegration of Saleem is part of an overarching motif of the formlessness of history, both national and personal, pushing against and eventually rupturing the story-form that Saleem the narrator attempts to force upon it. However, I find it interesting that sound technology provides a paradigm for thinking about the tide of history and that the breaking apart of Saleem's body and annihilation of his subjectivity is projected as a voicelessness. In the media-surfeited context of the late twentieth-century, the question is no longer what is the relationship between speech and embodied identity, but how can one maintain a sense of coherency while being bombarded with auditory and visual sensory data.

Yet another difference between modernist and postmodernist deployments of orality can also be understood in relation to (or potentially caused by) continued developments in communication technologies. Just as late nineteenth and early twentieth-century inventions such as the gramophone and radio challenged the accepted divide between speech and writing by making speech recordable and transportable, electronic and digital technologies make writing, like speech, communal and responsive.<sup>124</sup> While *Midnight's Children* is presented in the traditional written form of the book, it does provide us with an interaction that anticipates this kind of blurring of speech and writing. The interaction between Saleem and Padma both mirrors the relation of a traditional oral storytelling scene as envisioned by Benjamin, in which the listener and speaker create the story together,

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<sup>124</sup> We could perhaps place these kinds of electronic and digital technologies under the umbrella of what Ong calls "secondary orality," that is a kind of orality that is influenced by the presence of print culture (Ong 133-134). Ong applies this term to oral/aural technologies like the telephone and radio, sound technologies that are based on and made possible by writing and print. His emphasis on how these technologies create what Marshall McLuhan calls a "global village," a group sense broader than that created by primary orality, which is limited to the immediate reach of voices, creates the space for including the electronic and digital technologies I mention above, which also create such communities.

and anticipates the transformation of the storyteller in the digital age, where readers (or in Padma's case, listeners) provide tellers with instant feedback, make choices and demands, or can affect a narrative by absenting themselves. These are the kinds of fictions created by hypertext novels, gaming forums, interactive blogs, and some digital archives. While each of these stories comes to us primarily in visual form and primarily in writing, they create a sense of the oral that is far different than the singular voice of the imperial narrator, when his stories appear in writing. We might say that postmodern orality is based not in the body, or in an idea of a singular, present, and unmediated body, but in the relation of mediated bodies.

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