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**The Living Metaphor of *Orlando*:
Duration, Gender, and the Artistic Self**

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**The Living Metaphor of *Orlando*:
Duration, Gender, and the Artistic Self**

Virginia Woolf knows from the beginning what Orlando learns in the end: to be an artist is to be a living metaphor—a self which is not static and discrete, but evolving and “capable of others,” to quote Cixous (*Laugh*, 345). In *Orlando*, Woolf represents the realization of the artistic self as a “creative evolution” through time; Orlando experiences time as a duration, unlike her peers, which separates her from society and its moment-to-moment constitution of self through gender, allowing her to experiment with gender masquerade and develop the sensibility with which she can create metaphor.

To be an artist, at least according to the biographer persona in *Orlando*, is not to be one of “the most successful practitioners of the art of life,” for these are the people who

. . . somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison. . . . Of them we can justly say that they live precisely the sixty-eight or seventy-two years allotted them on the tombstone. (305)

Orlando, on the other hand, lives over three hundred years, though she calls herself thirty-six. As the biographer explains,

Indeed it is a difficult business— this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts; and it may have been her love of poetry that was to blame for making Orlando lose her shopping

list. . . . (306)

The distinction between Orlando and her peers is, of course, that their bodies beat in sync with societal clock-time, while Orlando is, in a sense, distracted by her “love of poetry”; her poetic sensibility allows her to experience time in a different way from her socialized peers, and it is due to this different experience of time that her poetic sensibility can fully evolve.

Those who live only the “sixty-eight or seventy-two years allotted them on the tombstone,” conform to the beat of society and apprehend themselves only in terms of moment-to-moment gender enactments (305). Using the phenomenological theory of acts, Judith Butler elucidates the societal construction of gender norms, stating that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted by a *stylized repetition of acts*” (270). She further explains that this repetition of acts over time constitutes a “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions,” giving the illusion that these genders are innate, and thus requiring their performance for the sake of “cultural survival” (273). Those who conform to “the spirit of the age,” to use Woolf’s term, repeat gendered actions from each moment to the next, never evolving, only maintaining the gender illusion; synchronizing their lives with society, their bodies chime gender as the clock chimes eleven, and in this performance they construct the appearance of gendered selves in accordance with society’s script (*Orlando* 246).

Whereas those who beat in time with the societal clock are essentially static, repeating gendered actions at the striking of each

new present, Orlando experiences time as a duration, evolving in accordance with the theories Henri Bergson puts forth in *Creative Evolution*. Bergson states:

My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing— rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow. (2)

One clear example of the way in which Orlando's past is conveyed into her present occurs as she shops in London and reflects on the continual presence of the past:

“Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers. When I step out of doors— as I do now,” she stepped on to the pavement of Oxford Street, “what is it I taste? Little herbs. I hear goat bells. I see mountains. Turkey? India? Persia?” (304-305)

Her experience is more than nostalgia: it exemplifies her accumulation of self through time, for she is not just thinking back—the past is literally present in her apprehension of herself in the world. As Bergson says, our personality is “being built up each instant with its accumulating experience” (6).

The basis of Bergson's philosophy of duration is his rejection of the commonly held notion that humans pass through a series of discrete states or phases. Bergson views life as a continuous evolution with no interval of change any more drastic than the next,

though we may mark distinct phases on either side of certain intervals:

. . . I speak of each of my states as if it formed a block and were a separate whole. I say indeed that I change, but the change seems to me to reside in the passage from one state to the next: of each state, taken separately, I am apt to think that it remains the same during all the time that it prevails. Nevertheless, a slight effort of attention would reveal to me that there is no feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change every moment: if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow. (1-2)

Bergson further explains that we never notice the change that occurs in a given "state," only remarking that a change has occurred when "it becomes sufficient to impress a new attitude on the body, a new direction on the attention" (2).

One would think that when Orlando, the man, suddenly becomes Orlando, the woman, s/he should note it as a drastic, if not catastrophic change of state. However, as the trumpets fade away and Orlando examines his new womanhood, he merely "looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath" (138). She reacts with no surprise and experiences no alteration of memory: she "went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle" (138). In the face of a seemingly drastic change of state, Orlando retains her sense of continuity.

In the persona of Orlando's biographer, however, Woolf portrays the resistance of one of a more scientific mind-set to the possibility of continuity through such change.¹ The biographer distances himself from the extraordinary circumstance of Orlando's change by simply reporting the biological "facts"; though scientists argued over Orlando's change, claiming that she must still be a man, or must have always been a woman, the biographer views the change as clear-cut: "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (139). Both views are in keeping with Bergson's opinion that scientists only concern themselves with the final moment of a given "state" and measure change from ending to ending, never noting the continual internal change of the state (24). The biographer views the change as a sudden switch with no duration trailing behind, impelling it to happen, while the other scientists refer to the final moment of the second state—Orlando as woman—or any moment in the first state—Orlando as man—and conclude that no evolution could ever occur.

But if we read only the biographer's report of Orlando's action and ignore his commentary, we receive a clear view of Orlando's self-apprehension. Since she barely reacts to no longer being a he, it is a likely conclusion that Orlando's sex change is part of a continual

¹ Thompson claims that Woolf mocks the genre of biography through the persona of Orlando's biographer. She quotes Graham: "The absurdities of the biographer are the absurdities of the whole approach to things which she considered typically masculine: the pompous self-importance; the childish faith in facts, dates, documents and 'evidence'; the reduction of truth to the logical conclusions deducible from such evidence; and the reluctance to deal with such nebulous aspects of life as passion, dreams, and imagination" (309). It is due to this argument that I refer to the biographer with the masculine pronoun.

progression which we only note at the moment “it becomes sufficient to impress a new attitude on the body” (Bergson 2). Lawrence notes instances early in Orlando’s development as a man that he grew weary with “the plots available to male and female.” Tired of hearing of how “Jakes lost his nose and Sukey her honour,” Orlando, Lawrence claims, rejects “castration threats and defloration—the plots that elaborate sexual difference. . . in favor of a more fluid bisexuality,” of which Sasha, the Russian princess in pants, might be Orlando’s first model (*Orlando* 31, Lawrence 254). Not needing to constitute himself through moment-to-moment gender enactment, Orlando can conceive of his socially-prescribed gender identity as being dispensable and can experiment with gender masquerade.

The accumulation through time of masquerade in each gender, then, culminates in a sex change which “figure[s]. . . [the] androgynous fantasy of the elimination of the ‘truth’ of sexual difference” (Lawrence 269); for “his form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (*Orlando* 138). In this interpretation, the “change” represents the very interval of duration; Orlando does not simply shift from one gendered state to another, as the biographer claims—for he does not become a vision of femininity—but becomes an accumulation of maleness and femaleness. This event is part of the greater, continual evolution Orlando undergoes as s/he progresses towards a fully developed artistic sensibility.

What, then, is the nature of being the accumulation of both genders, and how does this notion relate to the development of the

artistic sensibility? In *A Room of One's Own*, which Woolf wrote concurrently with *Orlando*, Woolf claims that the greatest artistic mind is "androgynous" in nature: "after being divided" through the enactment of a discrete gender, this mind "come[s] together again in a natural fusion" (98). Such a mind can be truly creative, Woolf argues, because

Some collaboration must take place in the mind between the man and the woman before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites must be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his [or her] experience with perfect fullness. (104)

While those who beat in sync with societal time in their gender enactment must divide their minds along the gender line for the sake of "cultural survival," Orlando's accumulating self could potentially be the site of the ideal "marriage of opposites."

Yet is the melding of masculine and feminine into an androgyne theoretically feasible? According to Jones, "The androgyne presents a logical impossibility, the erasure of difference in the very assertion of its presence" (158). The hermaphrodite is possible, as s/he exists in the realm of the physical, having the sexual anatomy of both sexes, but the androgyne, as Lawrence paraphrases Pacteau, "exists in the realm of the imagination as clothed, masculinity and femininity both operating as masquerade" (269-70). The androgyne cannot be a static unit or have a constant state of mind, but must, by definition, enact both genders thorough time, so

as to be apprehended as the duration of both in one. The fusion of genders is not and cannot be achieved; rather, Orlando's "androgyny" is a state of oscillation between the performances of both genders.² If Orlando is to fully develop her artistic sensibility, it must occur in a way other than "fusion" within the mind.

During the Victorian Era, Orlando faces the most oppressive "spirit of the age," in which she finds it impossible to maintain her androgynous self-concept. The separation of the sexes is so complete that Orlando cannot experiment with gender masquerade without being utterly ostracized. Wearing the costume society prescribed for Victorian women for the sake of "cultural survival," "she stood mournfully at the drawing-room window. . . dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted" (244). In previous eras, she had managed to explore both genders, performing masculinity or femininity according to her whim, expressing herself in terms of her whole duration

But the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before. (244)

²Jones deconstructs *A Room of One's Own* to explain this apparent theoretical contradiction between the two texts which were written concurrently. Quoting Jacobus, Jones claims that Woolf intended the proposed "undivided consciousness" as "an essentially Utopian vision," and that the text goes against this ideal in its more practical "recuperation of the mother—'we think back through our mothers if we are women' (*Room* 79)" (Jones 158).

In the sharp gender division of the nineteenth century, Orlando, who apprehends herself as the accumulation of both genders, is torn; and, needing someone “to lean on,” she abruptly marries. In a literal reading of the text, Orlando wanders through the moors, lamenting her loneliness, until she spies a group of rooks flying in circles above her; she suddenly experiences “some strange ecstasy” and proclaims “I have found my mate. . . . It is the moor. I am nature’s bride,” falls asleep, and awakens to the arrival of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine on horseback (248): “A few minutes later, they became engaged” (250). In this reading the engagement to Shelmerdine seems a contradiction of her autonomous choice to ignore society’s demands and “wed” her one true love, nature.

Brown, however, shows that Orlando marries the one man least likely to oppress her, claiming that Woolf’s characterization of Shelmerdine “has Orlando attach herself to the one person during the century most fully approximating true androgyny, Shelley” (197).³ He points out that the relationship of Orlando and Shelmerdine seems in line with Shelley’s theories of “sympathetic attraction,” for they are “mirror images of one another, androgynous counterparts or ‘antitypes’ [in Shelleyan terminology], in whom male and female are so intermixed that single-sexed identity no longer has meaning” (198). Theirs is an attraction based on “total sympathetic

³ See Brown’s detailed examination of the many resonances the name “Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine” has with the life of the great Romantic poet (190).

identification through likeness,” Brown explains, quoting one particularly illustrative passage:

“You’re a woman, Shell!” she cried.

“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried. (252)

According to Brown, this typifies Shelley’s theory that the stronger the resemblance and “sympathy” between a man and woman, the stronger their subsequent bond.

Brown goes on to fault Woolf, though, for not following through on this bond to the extent that Shelley does, as she fails to posit an idealized androgynous future as he did:

Moreover, notwithstanding the fable’s governing androgynous symbolism, femaleness is plainly its ideal—Orlando’s metamorphosis is from man to woman, not vice versa. The absorption of maleness is the novel’s goal.

(200)

Brown, of course, enters the discourse on *Orlando* with a clear bias towards Shelley’s complete melding and eradication of gender, of which Woolf seems to be a proponent in her call for return to the “natural fusion” of genders within the mind. However, as I have already determined, the Shelleyan notion of androgyny cannot be achieved in *Orlando*, as she apprehends herself in terms of the accumulation—not blending—of the genders she has performed through her life. In this interpretation, static androgyny is simply not the issue, even if it is the Shelleyan ideal. Brown’s interpretation fails to fully explain the introduction of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine in the text, as he basically claims that Woolf needed to

bring a man into Orlando's life to "complete" her in the face of the Victorian separation of spheres.

Jones, however, explores the possibility that Orlando actually constructs Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine out of her self:

Is he not a function of language that Orlando constructs to answer the demands of the age and of her own need to love? Is he not a voice answering her voice—what Orlando conceives as the thing itself—her greatest creative enterprise? The nineteenth century demands not a lover but a husband; Orlando creates one in a flight of metaphors. . . . (164)

Apprehending herself as the duration of both male and female gender enactment, Orlando experiences the "psychic oscillations" which Pacteau claims are central to the concept of androgyny; by naming her masculine performance into a sort of separate, yet internal, existence, Orlando "regain[s] [her] other half," which the Victorian Era would have her eradicate, "reform[ing] the ideal image lost and found in the mirror. . ." (Jones 158). The creation of Shelmerdine is thus a narcissistic act, through which Orlando appears to conform to social rules, yet still maintains her enduring identity.

As Orlando wanders through the grounds of her estate, pondering her unmarried state, she notices rooks flying above her: "A steel-blue plume from one of them fell among the heather. She loved wild birds feathers. She had used to collect them as a boy" (247). In the last sentence of this thought process, Orlando contemplates her self in terms of her life-long duration, identifying her experience as a boy with her experience now as a woman.

Orlando's identification of her boyhood love of feathers is the inception of Shelmerdine, for just moments later he "arrives,"

. . . with the wild, dark-plumed name—a name which had in her mind, the steel blue gleam of rooks' wings, the hoarse laughter of their caws, the snake-like twisting descent of their feathers in a silver pool. . . . (251)

His identity comes from her experience; he is born out of her enduring self.

Jones explains the root of the narcissistic impulse in Lacanian/Kristevan terminology:

Abjection, a pre-condition of narcissism, is the recognition of the inaugural loss [of the mother], the *want* on which "any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded". . . . Unable to identify with something outside itself, the subject finds "the impossible" within: the subject experiences the abject when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than abject. (159)

The creation of Shelmerdine formalizes Orlando's gender oscillation, as the process of reaching towards the abject, or other within, confounds the seemingly stable positions of subject and other. At their first "communication," Orlando says, "I am dead, sir" (250). By identifying with the other within her, she annihilates selfhood, momentarily tearing down the boundary between self and other.

It is important to remember, though, that identifying with the abject does not constitute unification. Orlando is not and does not become the idealized, static androgyne that Brown asserts as the

Shelleyan ideal. Their communication shows the blurring of gender positions:

“Are you positive you aren’t a man?” he would ask anxiously, and she would echo,

“Can it be possible you’re not a woman?” and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once. (258)

However, this blurring of positions does not result in a unification. The separation of the masculine and feminine gender enactment is symbolized in Shelmerdine’s “physical” departure to perform masculinity to the hilt, sailing around Cape Horn “in the teeth of a gale” (327). The separation of her male and female gender enactment established, Orlando finds that she “need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself” (266); and she proceeds, at long last, to finish the poem she has been writing and rewriting for centuries, “The Oak Tree.”

This burst of creative energy does not occur through a “natural fusion” of male and female in the mind of Orlando, but rather, through their formal split. As Jones states, “writing operates precisely out of this split. . . . [in] *Orlando*, the split or *vide* is never sutured” (158). Using Kristeva, Jones further explains,

. . . the subject is constituted in language *as* the division or splitting inherent to symbolization: the subject

operates within language by constantly repeating the original moment of fundamental and irreducible division entailed in the child's loss of the mother. (159)

Orlando's narcissistic act of creating her lover within her self is a ". . . defense against, as well as the means of maintaining, the emptiness of separation, of loss, that is intrinsic to the beginning of symbolic function" (Jones 159). Writing, thus, comes from the exploration of the space between genders, and the testing of the borders of that space. Poetry is, as Orlando later realizes, "a voice answering a voice"; as a being who apprehends herself as the performer of each gender, Orlando both lives and writes through the communication of these voices— through their mingling and separation.

If she must make her masculine experience the abject in order to maintain its presence in her self concept in the Victorian Era, then the dawning of the "present moment" threatens Orlando's self-consciousness utterly. The present moment is a state of perpetual present, ever-beginning anew, not allowing for duration and accumulation of self. Bergson explains that in "a world that dies and is reborn at every instant" evolution cannot occur, because "evolution implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link" (23-24).

Thus, Orlando experiences life in the present moment as a "terrifying revelation" akin to a physical assault:

. . . the clock ticked louder and louder until there was a terrific explosion right in her ear. Orlando leapt as if she

had been violently struck on the head. Ten times she was struck. In fact, it was ten o'clock in the morning.

(298)

The present moment strips Orlando of her accumulating self and the tolling of the societal clock-time urges her to constitute herself through gender performance. She powders her nose in public, noting that the present gender script does not require women to be as “roundabout in their ways” as in previous eras (302). She also attempts a shopping trip for domestic goods—bath salts, boys’ boots, and sheets for a double bed. But her trip is not completed, as no action can be completed in the perpetual immediacy of the present moment. Orlando observes, “Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish. What was seen begun—like two friends starting to meet each other across the street—was never seen ended” (307).⁴

The present moment, therefore, precludes evolution. According to Bergson,

. . . our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but

⁴ It is an arguable point, then, that even gender cannot be constructed in the immediacy of the present moment, and that even those who conform to the beat of the societal clock experience crises of consciousness. But the question then becomes, were those who constitute themselves through gender enactment ever really “conscious?” And I believe that Butler would say no, since they continually enact and reenact a fiction, never realizing they are creating it, rather than expressing an innate biological predisposition. My conclusion, then, is that since performers of gender are not conscious that they are creating “the *illusion* of an abiding gendered self” as they act, they could continue to believe in the illusion in the perpetual present, even though they couldn’t physically “express” it. Orlando, on the other hand, never believed in the illusion and is trying in vain to create it in the present moment.

the present— no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. (5)

Sartre, in his criticism of Faulkner's metaphysics of perpetual present in *The Sound and The Fury*, agrees with Bergson in this instance, asserting that "the nature of consciousness implies. . . that it project itself into the future" (271). Orlando's experience of the present moment, thus, becomes a crisis of consciousness, as she can neither accumulate self nor project self into the future. She is trapped in an endless series of static presents.

The present moment can be defined as time without chronology, static in the sense that evolution cannot take place in its perpetual newness. However, the Present Moment can also be read as an historical setting, synonymous with the modernist era, and is therefore characterized by a "spirit of the age," like every other era in which Orlando lived, from the Elizabethan to the Victorian. In this reading, the "spirit of the age" would be defined in terms of the scientific and philosophic debates which became major themes in modernist art.⁵ Einstein's theory of relativity lends insight to one particular passage, in which Orlando's motion threatens her consciousness, implicitly, I believe, because this motion arrests time:

The process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of body and mind, which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself

⁵ See Julie Johnson's detailed examination of the Modernist reaction to Einstein's Theory of Relativity: "The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature: An Overview and *The Sound and the Fury*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 10 (1983): 217-230.

that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment. (307)

In a static moment Orlando loses her sense of continuity and is unable to project herself into the future, since there is none; therefore, she is unable to apprehend her existence. It is only when the bits of body, mind, and surroundings which had been fragmented like bits of paper slow in their swirling through the air and can recombine that enough future slips through for Orlando to complete the acts of perception and self-apprehension: "Her mind regain[s] the illusion of holding things within itself and she [sees] a cottage, a farmyard, and four cows, all precisely life-size" (307). Orlando struggles in the present moment to be an enduring, changing, self-conscious self, and is up against both the nature of the perpetual present and the nature of existence in the modernist Present.

The final section of the book, hence, details Orlando's struggle to maintain her sense of continuity despite the constant interruption of the clock chiming in the Present. Likewise, the reader of Orlando's "biography" must struggle to maintain a sense of Orlando's continuity despite the continual patriarchal "voice-over" of the biographer, who divides Orlando into pieces he can understand, and then forces a reunion as he interprets Orlando's struggle for continuity as a search for a unitary (and by definition constant, non-evolving) self. A careful examination of Orlando's monologue shows that the biographer's asides are merely an attempt to force Orlando's

experience to fit the mold of masculine humanist tradition.⁶ The biographer, thus, imposes categories on Orlando so that he can better comprehend her, as her life has defied all of his notions of propriety and science.⁷

Primarily, he divides her into selves, explaining that when Orlando calls "Orlando?" she is seeking the "Captain self"—the highest self on the hierarchy of the many selves which Orlando could have called:

Orlando now may have called on the boy who cut the nigger's head down. . . the boy who handed the Queen a bowl of rose water; or she may have called on the young man who fell in love with Sasha. . . or she may have wanted the woman to come to her. . . the Fine Lady. . . the girl in love with life. . . the Patroness of letters. . . all these selves were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (309-10)

This passage recalls Bergson's description of the scientific mind which divides the subject it studies into a series of inert segments for easier manipulation; the intellect must "regard the real object in hand, or the real elements into which we have resolved it, as *provisionally final*, and to treat them as so many *units*" (162). A subject who endures cannot be grasped or contained, for s/he is continually evolving; this would be especially frustrating to a

⁶ See Toril Moi's introduction in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London: Routledge, 1988, in reference to the unitary self of humanist tradition.

⁷ See discussion of biographer's commentary on Orlando's sex-change on page five.

biographer who is charged to capture his subject on paper, and for this reason, Orlando's biographer attempts to arrest her duration, labeling her at intervals, and then again uniting her under the auspices of a "true self." Bergson describes this intellectual tendency following his discussion of the falsity of discrete "states":

As our attention has distinguished and separated them artificially, it is obliged next to reunite them by an artificial bond. It imagines, therefore, a formless *ego*, indifferent and unchangeable, on which it threads the psychic states which it has set up as independent entities . . . it perceives distinct and, so to speak, *solid* colours, set side by side like the beads of a necklace; it must perforce then suppose a thread, also itself solid, to hold the beads together. (3-4)

Bergson, of course, claims that this ego does not exist because it cannot endure if it is by definition a constant, a solid: "Never can these solids strung upon a solid make up that duration which flows" (4).

Orlando, therefore, is not seeking a constant "true self" which subordinates all of her other separate inert selves. Rather, when she calls "Orlando?" she is trying to reestablish her sense of continuity—the evolving, accumulating Orlando which she has been, is, and will be. Her self is unitary only in the sense that it is one duration— one continual evolution; it is neither a constant, nor an *a priori* soul.

Struggling to apprehend herself in the perpetual present, Orlando reviews the accumulation of her self⁸:

“What then? Who then?” she said. “Thirty-six; in a motor car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? . . . My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? (here a new self came in). Don’t care a damn if I am. Truthful? I think so. Generous? Oh, but that don’t count (here a new self came in). Lying in bed of a morning on fine linen; listening to the pigeons; silver dishes; wine; maids; footmen. Spoilt? Perhaps. . . . (310-11)

At the end of this long history review, Orlando sighs:

Haunted! ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies too fast. I’ve seen it, here—there—there—England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets. . . which shrivel as I’ve seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them. And sometimes there’s an inch of silver—six words—in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish that lives in the coral groves. (313)

And then, the biographer states, “the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord” (313-14). Orlando-of-the-present-moment, barely clinging to self-consciousness, reconnects with Orlando-

⁸ In this passage, the words are Orlando’s “own,” and the parenthetical play-by-play is the biographer’s. His disclaimer reads: “we only copy [them] as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may well be wrong” (310).

through-the-ages, and in the regaining of her enduring self is able to withstand the present, “for she was now one and entire,” in her duration, “and presented it may be a larger surface to the shock of time” (320).

The question then remains, what brought about this re-establishment of continuity? The answer is language. As the split of self and other is necessary to the “symbolization” of language, it is through language that the split can be narrowed, the gap momentarily bridged. Jones writes:

Metaphor can be conceived as an economy that modifies language when the borders between subject and object of the utterance act are not distinguishable. (169)

It is the metaphor that Orlando has sought her whole life; as she is a living metaphor—the juxtaposition through duration of male and female—she has sought through language to capture her nature. Flinging words, Orlando has tried to net the essence of her enduring self—the goose which evolves into a great fish—the very metaphor which Cixous uses in “The Laugh of Medusa” to describe the nature of woman:

. . . airborne swimmer, in flight, she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you. (345)

Orlando seeks the self which knows other, which uses language to explore the borders between genders, individuals, and itself and the outside world.

The final passages in the book thus depict Orlando's gradual realization of the wild goose—her gradual shift towards apprehending herself and the world around her through what Bergson calls "intuition": the intellect liberated from its tendency to divide and categorize by a mobile language, which breaks down the boundaries between objects and between subjects and objects as it "flies from one thing to another" (168). When Orlando became "nature's bride," naming Shelmerdine with its objects—"The beautiful, glittering name fell out of the sky like a steel blue feather"—Orlando blurred the boundary between self and nature, juxtaposing nature and the abject masculine within her. In the present moment, she experiences the further blurring of self and nature: "All this, the trees, deer, and turf, she observed with the greatest satisfaction as if her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely" (314). She does not unite with nature, *per se*, but in her new mind-set of metaphor, she experiences "the sympathetic communication. . . between [her self] and the rest of living. . . reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation" (Bergson 187).

She discovers the ability to create beauty, through the reciprocal interpenetration of self and outside world. When Orlando saw with disgust the pink flesh of Joe's nail-less thumb,

The sight was so repulsive that she felt faint for a moment, but in that moment's darkness, when her eyelids flickered, she was relieved of the pressure of the present. There was something strange in the shadow that the flicker of the eyes cast, something which. . . is always

absent from the present—whence its terror, its non-descript character—something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty, for it has no body, is as a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to. (321-22)

In the moment in which she withdraws from the outside world by blinking, Orlando is grounded in her enduring self-concept—her existence as a living metaphor—which assures her that when she again opens her eyes she can extend her self, through metaphor, out into the world, creating beauty and soothing the starkness of the present moment.

Orlando alternates her gazes, inward and outward, permutating self and other in the moments when the borders between break down. The shadow of beauty which is cast in the flicker of the eye . . . deepened now at the back of her brain (which is the part farthest from sight) into a pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know. She now looked down into this pool or sea in which everything is reflected—and indeed, some say that all our most violent passions, and art and religion are the reflections which we see in the dark hollow at the back of the head when the visible world is obscured for a time. (322-23)

Reflecting upon the deep pool of her enduring self, Orlando recognizes that she is “about to understand” the origin of the most profound forces in human existence: passion, art and religion (323).

Her intuitive ability to create through metaphor gives her the power to transform her world into one of profound meaning. As she gazes upon the outside world,

. . . the hawthorn bushes [are] partly ladies and gentlemen sitting with card cases and gold-mounted canes; the sheep [are] partly tall Mayfair houses; everything [is] partly something else, and each gain[s] an odd moving power from this union of itself and something not itself so that with this mixture of truth and falsehood her mind [becomes] like a forest in which things [move]; lights and shadows [change], and one thing [becomes] another. (323)

Her enduring mind is a fertile forest of imagery and thoughts; by exploring the space between unlike things, Orlando reduces that space, creating through her metaphors the profundity which gives life in the present moment meaning.

With the “return” of Shelmerdine at the close of the novel, the abject again becomes subject, and the wild goose—the artistic self, evolving and “capable of others” is fully realized:

And as Shelmerdine, now grown a fine sea captain, hale, fresh-coloured, and alert, leapt to the ground, there sprang over his head a single wild bird.

“It is the goose!” Orlando cried. “The wild goose. . . .”
(329)

The clock strikes midnight, October eleventh, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight—the year, if not the very date, of the publication of *Orlando*. At this moment of almost magical possibility, Orlando is

capable of the writing Woolf just completed—of expressing in language the living metaphor that she is. As Cixous writes,

Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same and of other without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from other within. A course that multiplies transformations by the thousands. (*Newly Born*, 43)

The resonance between *Orlando* and the writing of Cixous is telling, especially when one considers how the body figures into the novel's elaborate metaphor. Since Orlando is the accumulation of male and female gender performance, yet is embodied as a biological woman⁹, we must question just how a biologically-sexed woman would apprehend herself in terms of both masculinity and femininity. According to Jones, this very enigma is the nature of woman's experience. Woman is

. . . that which is "other," a zero marker, a cypher, empty of content. . . . The enigma of "woman," according to Sarah Kofman, is the perpetual shifting back and forth between masculinity and femininity; woman is defined by the absence of a stable position. In this sense, Orlando is "woman" precisely because she changes sex. . . .(156)

⁹ Orlando is most definitely not a hermaphrodite, as our biographer, the voice of scientific authority, attests that "he was a woman" (137).

Through this interpretation, Woolf's fantastical story of sex change becomes the literalization of woman's flowing self through and between socially defined gender positions—a duration of oscillation which, in a society which creates the “cultural fiction” of innate, fixed genders, is automatically termed “other.” And thus, Orlando's developing artistic sensibility, which, as Cixous writes, works the “in-between” of gender and of self and nature, could very possibly be *l'écriture féminine*.

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