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Tempo and Temporality in Anglo-American Modernist Literature

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Tempo and Temporality in Anglo-American Modernist Literature

by

Yuki Tanaka

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Washington University in St. Louis

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Yuki Tanaka

Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2016

Professor Vincent Sherry, Chair

My dissertation challenges the widespread assumption that modernist literature represents time as positive and affirmative, as a locus of possibility. Critics and scholars have obscured modernists’ more troubled relationship to time by emphasizing the critical narrative in which art triumphs over time. To construct this narrative, many of them have used spatializing language to discuss modernist time, and hence made it seem more static and manageable than it actually is. I argue that modernists were conscious of the intractability of time, of what Henri Bergson called “time flowing”—experiential time that resists the imposition of spatial order. I explore the modernists’ representation of “time flowing” through the examination of their syntactic tempo. While narrative and other spatializing devices like meter and rhyme tend to represent time as static, the sentence—the way it unfolds on the page, word by word—amplifies the temporal nature of experiential time. Close attention to syntax helps us recover how modernists engaged with fluid time, and their awareness that time slips away from the grasp of representational language. My dissertation focuses on Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.
Introduction: What We Talk about When We Talk about Modernism and Time

Time has been one of the central issues of modernist studies and has been discussed through different critical lenses. But in scholarship on modernism and time, there are two recurring assumptions that underpin and, I would argue, limit this critical debate. First, the modernists’ representation of time is often assumed to be affirmative: it is a locus of new energy, moments of being, epiphanies, which valorize subjective time against mechanical, public time. This empowered subjectivity and its antinomian attitude reflect the energy and excitement of technological and aesthetic innovations that characterize the time of modernity. As Stephen Kern has argued in his landmark book on the time and space of the early twentieth century, the spirit of this period was “to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible” (34). Both early and recent scholars who have written on modernist time take this resistance model for granted, and they often reinforce it by relating the narrative of transcendence in which art conquers time.

Second, this transcendental narrative goes hand in hand with the spatial representation of time. Early readers of modernist literature emphasized the narrative of freezing time by using markedly spatializing language, most famously Joseph Frank in his classic essay “The Idea of Spatial Form” (1945). Frank argues that modernists “ideally intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” (10). The verbal fragments of The Waste Land, for example, make sense if they are “juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously” (14).

The problem with such spatial reading is that it makes time more manageable than it actually is by obscuring its fluid temporal nature. For example, Frank’s discussion of Proust translates time into space: “To experience the passage of time, Proust had learned, it was
necessary to rise above it and to grasp both past and present simultaneously in a moment of what he called ‘pure time.’ But ‘pure time,’ obviously, is not time at all—it is perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space” (26-7). Here Frank substitutes space for time, admitting that what he calls “pure time” is really space. As we will see, this substitution recurs in the critical history of modernist time to suggest that modernists have the power to “rise above” their temporal experience by spatializing it. In *Time and Free Will*, Henri Bergson addresses this confusion of time and space by asking, “Can time be adequately represented by space?” He answers, “Yes, if you are dealing with time flown; No, if you speak of time flowing” (221). The standard account of modernist time has focused on “time flown,” or spatialized time, and consequently obscured the modernists’ engagement with “time flowing,” the actual experience of time.

What happens to our sense of modernists’ engagement with time when we restore this dimension of experiential time? In other words, how does it alter our understanding of modernist time if we avoid spatial metaphors that have pervaded the critical discourse on modernist time? In my dissertation I argue that, once we pay attention to the literary representation of “time flowing” without the spatial lens, modernist literature reveals a far less positive temporality. Paul de Man locates this negative temporality at the heart of the modernist dilemma. He cites Baudelaire’s phrase “représentation du present,” which “combines a repetitive with an instantaneous pattern without apparent awareness of the incompatibility” (“Literary History” 156). That is, any representation of the present lacks its instantaneity because re-presentation is always secondary to the original intensity of the present. De Man’s formulation suggests that far from conquering time through spatialization, modernists struggled to represent the ever-flowing present in their broken medium.
Modernists’ troubled relationship to time has started to be acknowledged in recent years. In *Dying for Time* (2012) Martin Hägglund argues that modernists were self-conscious of a special, empowered moment fading as soon as it comes into being, and that critical tradition has ignored this self-consciousness in favor of a transcendental narrative in which time is conquered and made eternal by the power of art. In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015) Vincent Sherry historicizes the modernist self-consciousness of time passing by reintroducing decadence, arguing that critics and scholars have invented and exaggerated the radical break between the progressive, future-oriented temporality of modernism and “the feeling of declining times and exhausted time” (60) in decadent literature. In his readings of modernist works, Sherry locates the imagery and cadence of death, degeneration, dying youth and other decadence tropes, recovering the lost link between modernism and the previous literature.

In my dissertation I will follow their leads by questioning standard accounts of modernist time as positive and affirmative, showing how the spatializing language of literary criticism has obscured modernists’ representation of negative temporality. In fact, the recognition of time’s negativity was already there at the beginning of the modernist period when Wyndham Lewis criticized Bergson’s “time-cult.” Bergson’s philosophy valorized the individual perception of time as opposed to collective, regulated clock-time. In *Time and Western Man*, Lewis warns against this immersive nature of experiential time, for it can mechanize subjectivity. “Time for the bergsonian [sic] or relativist is,” Lewis argues, “fundamentally sensation; that is what Bergson’s durée always conceals beneath its pretentious metaphysic. It is the glorification of the life-of-the-moment, with no reference beyond itself and no absolute or universal value…” (11). For Lewis, Bergson’s philosophy threatens the agency of self because such sensory bombardment makes “detached thinking” impossible (xi).
Lewis criticizes the valorization of the now and new, seeing the accelerated tempo of modernity symbolized by advertisements. Advertisements suggest that “everything that happens today (or everything that is being advertised here and now) is better, bigger, brighter, more astonishing than anything that has ever existed before” (12). This “submission to a giant hyperbolic close-up of a moment” breaks up “all individual continuity” (13). Here is the negative side of accelerated modernity: each moment is so intense that it overwhelsms the perceiver, leaving no continuity with the perceiver’s past self.

While Lewis discusses the negative aspect of the intense “now,” Bergson does not unambiguously commend the individual perception of the present either. Although Lewis’s vehement attack on Bergson in Time and Western Man has led us to consider their ideas as radically different, Bergson’s individualist stance was more complex. He qualifies the empowerment of individual agency by suggesting that “time flowing” may be beyond the reach of linguistic representation. While touting the uniqueness of each moment in duration, he keeps coming back to the difficulty of conceiving such fluid, individuated time because we tend to spatialize time. The issue has to do with the fact that the medium of representation is a social medium not amenable to the representation of individuated time: “Consciousness, goaded by an insatiable desire to separate, substitutes the symbol for the reality, or perceives the reality only through the symbol” (128). This substitution, in which fluid time is compartmentalized into a series of spatial moments, occurs because “the self thus refracted, and thereby broken to pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular” (128).

Bergson emphasizes this limitation of language to represent individuated time because language is by nature social, impersonal. It cannot represent duration “without arresting its
mobility or fit it into its common-place forms without making it into public property” (129). At times, Bergson concedes that space is necessary because “the intuition of a homogenous space is already a step towards social life” (138). The stability of space and public time as opposed to individuated, internal time makes social life possible. It even makes communication possible insofar as we use language as a common property.

The problem of experiential time and its resistance to representation: this is the issue of modernist temporality that I will be following throughout my dissertation. I will examine modernist literature to recover the negativity of temporal experience that both Bergson and Lewis perceived. I argue that modernists were conscious of the fluid nature of time and the difficulty of representing such temporal experience. It is threatening, as Lewis suggests, because it may overwhelm the perceiver to the point of diminishing his or her subjectivity. Indeed, this diminution of subjectivity by temporal experience is what troubled Yeats in reading modernist works like Ulysses, The Waves, and A Draft of XXX Cantos: “a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint; man no hard bright mirror dawdling by the dry sticks of a hedge, but a swimmer, or rather the waves themselves. In this new literature . . . man in himself is nothing” (“Appendix” 703). In the next two sections I will survey how this destructive nature of experiential time has been overlooked in much scholarship on modernist literature.

**Positive Modernity / Modernism**

As I have mentioned in the previous section, when critics and scholars talk about modernists’ engagement with time, they are really talking about space disguised as time. One reason for this partial account of modernism has to do with the way we talk about modernity, the condition in which modernism arose. What happens here is the confusion of the two: since
modernity is often discussed in terms of the accelerated technological changes that dramatically transformed people’s lives, this characterization rubs off on our understanding of modernist literature.

What emerges from the substitution of space for time is this particular strain of modernism: the affirmative literature that reflects the standard account of modernity as a vibrant moment of the “new.” To show how these two assumptions are pervasive and intertwined in the critical history of modernist time, I will start with Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space* (1983) because his understanding of modernist time underlies more recent works on this subject. Kern discusses technological changes that happened between 1880 and 1918 and their impact on the human perception of time. Citing modern inventions such as the railway, the telephone, and the wireless telegraph, Kern argues that time came to be perceived as simultaneous rather than linear: “The new technology changed the dimensions of experience so rapidly that the future seemed to rush toward the present at a tempo as hurried and as irregular as Stravinsky’s music” (88). The moment is so dilated and accelerated by technological innovations that it ceases to be a passing moment and becomes “simultaneous,” all times existing in the same moment.¹

Kern’s view of the period is characterized by this forward-moving energy of futurism, which may explain why his account of the modernist “now” takes on an affirmative character. Indeed, the cultural context of the “new” tends to rub off on our general understanding of time in the early twentieth century. For example, in a similar vein, Modris Eksteins discusses Germany from pre-WWI to the rise and fall of Nazism in the context of the rapid industrial growth and technological changes that catapulted the country into “the modernist nation par excellence”:

“The general impulse in Germany before 1914 was, then, starkly future-oriented. Where there was dissatisfaction or anxiety, it was to be overcome by change. The entire German setting at the fin de siècle was characterized by a Flucht nach vorne, a flight forward” (73).

This one-sided account of modernity as positive, affirmative, the moment that is radically different from the past, still pervades more recent criticism. Ronald Schleifer’s Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930 (2000) is a successor to Kern’s book in its scope and argument, and shares his assumption about modernist temporality. Schleifer elaborates on what Kern called “the crisis of abundance” that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Schleifer argues that in this period, the concept of time changed as a result of massive technological developments and material surfeit after the Second Industrial Revolution, which brought out “the enormous multiplication of commodities available for consumption in a world seemingly filled with abundances of things” (4). Prior to this crisis, Schleifer maintains, time was perceived as homogenous, with no temporal peaks and valleys: “every moment is ‘original’; every moment presents the subject of experience with a new beginning, a clean slate” (38). This previous understanding of time, he argues, is characteristic of the Enlightenment, while Post-Enlightenment time is characterized by “the collisions of past and present, the apocalyptic sense of the new, the radically temporal subject of experience” (68). His example of the former temporal sensibility is the narrative of George Eliot. The Mill on the Floss, Schleifer claims, “presents time unselfconsciously and unproblematically” (70). Similarly, in Adam Bede, “time is always the same, mathematical, infinitely divisible, a pure ether that conditions but does not affect experience and understanding” (71). Unlike modernists, Eliot is not self-conscious of the temporal difference between present and past,
because “time is absolutely objective and homogenous to the point of not being noted at all” (74).

While Schleifer does not explicitly use spatial metaphors or describe a transcendental narrative in which time is conquered, he assigns an affirmative character to the present by describing the early twentieth century as governed by the “logic of abundance.” By insisting on the term “abundance,” Schleifer foregrounds Kern’s affirmative understanding of the modernist present. “Abundance” connotes the energy of the new, material surfeit brought out by the innovative power of new technologies. But such a sweeping generalization only illuminates one side of the story about the early twentieth century. For example, how can the logic of abundance explain writers like Samuel Beckett, who wrote about death and the dying in his spare, deliberately impoverished language? Schleifer addresses this contradiction, but his answer is not convincing. He argues that Beckett’s ability to choose to write in this style of “poverty” is indicative of the logic of abundance because it demonstrates an abundance of stylistic options available to modern writers: “In fact, the very multiplication of responses—this ‘dialectic’ of abundance and poverty where synthesis is impossible—is a form of abundance” (29).

The forced quality of Schleifer’s argument suggests that the logic of abundance obscures something negative about the early twentieth century. I am suggesting that this recurring narrative of modernist time as new, futuristic, abundant, and extra-temporal only tells one side of how modernists engaged with time. The missing half is the recognition of time’s negativity noted by de Man, Lewis, and Bergson. In their view, time passes away as soon as it comes into being even before language can represent it, and this flux diminishes human subjectivity.

**Critical History of Modernist Time**
Kern and Schleifer’s general studies on modernist time characterize it as affirmative, and literary critics and scholars have read modernist literature in a similarly positive light, often using transcendental narrative and spatializing language. I will start with some of the foundational works in modernist studies. While not spatial in nature, their critical language emphasizes the power of art to arrive at an extratemporal condition. In *Axel’s Castle* (1931), for example, Edmund Wilson argues that modernists like Eliot, Proust, Joyce, and Stein were influenced by the tradition of French Symbolism, and in discussing each writer, he emphasizes this ill-defined word “symbol.” For example, in his chapter on Proust, Wilson claims that “enduring extra-temporal symbols” permeate *In Search of Lost Time* (162). Proust transcends time, Wilson argues, by writing his long novel, which is “something outside [time]: a work of art” (162). Similarly, in *Romantic Image* (1957) Frank Kermode takes the idea of “the Image as a radiant truth out of space and time” to be central to understanding the continuity between nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literature (4).

Modernism and space are linked most explicitly in Joseph Frank’s essay “The Idea of Spatial Form” (1945). Frank argues that the disjunctive narrative of a modernist text should not trouble us because as long as we can pay attention to important moments in the text and perceive them simultaneously like space, they start to constitute a “continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out…. Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition” (63).

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2 For further discussion of how critics and scholars have used the terms “symbol” and “symbolism,” see Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1-36.
As “timeless unity” suggests, Frank’s spatial form is as quasi-spiritual as Wilson’s symbol and Kermode’s Image. As a later scholar, Kern tones down this quasi-spiritual language in discussing modernist time, but he still uses Frank’s spatializing language to suggest the same kind of transcendental narrative where the present is so intensified that in that moment all times become simultaneous and make the moment last a little longer, as if dilated in space. In these foundational works on modernist literature, time ceases to be temporal when it is represented in a literary text, but becomes a space in which “time flowing” vanishes. This understanding of time is the polar opposite of de Man and Bergson’s, since both of them questioned whether it is even possible to represent “time flowing,” or the temporal nature of time. Rather than questioning this temporal gap between representation and time flowing, these early scholars have created an affirmative narrative in which art triumphs over time.

Recent criticism on modernist time has been characterized by a shift from an earlier focus on private time to the modernists’ engagement with public time. For example, two recent books foreground the modernists’ engagement with daily, social time: Bryony Randall’s *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (2007) and Liesl Olson’s *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009). Randall argues that modernists were interested not just in special, subjective moments of being but “the present, life now, ongoing daily time” (7). Similarly, Olson claims that our emphasis on such extra-ordinary moments as epiphanies “obscures modernism’s commitment to the ordinary, to experiences that are not heightened. The ordinary sometimes may be internalized, but it is never transcendent” (4). The problem for this critical move, however, is that it elides the issue of literary representation of time. They have removed from the consideration of modernist time any temporal peaks and valleys by representing daily time as a durational continuum where nothing happens. In this way, Randall and Olson abolish the temporal nature of experiential time as Kern
has done. The difference is that they now focus on the affirmation of daily time rather than subjective time. Daily time is durational; hence, nothing fades. The idea of moments is irrelevant to their conception of modernist time. Since there is no heightened moment, there is no letdown, no thought of death. In short, Randall and Olson transform time into a static, harmless continuum where temporal flow is negated. Although they try to revise the earlier account of modernist time as purely subjective by introducing the notion of daily or ordinary time, they still take time to be affirmative like Kern, if not life-affirming. They do so without explicitly spatial metaphors, but their conception of time is virtually spatial, since they conceive of it as a homogenous duration.

On the other side of the critical spectrum, some recent scholars have retained the scope of the transcendental ambition that early scholars assigned to modernism rather than scaling it down to the daily and ordinary. But their underlying assumptions are the same: in these works, time continues to be discussed in spatial metaphors, and the modernists’ relationship to time is described in terms of transcendence. In *The Cosmic Time of Empire: Modern Britain and World Literature* (2010), Adam Barrows reads the representation of time in fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century fiction in the context of the Greenwich Meridian Conference in 1884. According to Barrows, this year “marks the date when England begins to export British time as a commodity to an entire globe newly dependent on Greenwich precision” (8). Late Victorian writers differ from modernists in their response to this imposition of standard imperial time: “If the twentieth-century modernist . . . found standard time’s homogenization of global space and time problematic, fin de siècle ‘imperial gothics’ tended both thematically and formally to reinforce and naturalize standard time’s power to unify the globe” (13). Like Randall and Olson, Barrows responds to the Marxist charge, that modernists retreated from society into their private world, by focusing on the ways in which “modernist texts engaged with rather than evaded the
enlistment of temporality in the imperial project, while simultaneously forging alternative models of temporality resistant to empire’s demands” (4). Barrows represents time as geographical, arguing that imperial time is located in Greenwich and that modernists challenge the imposition of one official time by “opening up spaces and times for alternative social configurations” (14).

Barrows suggests a transcendental narrative in which modernist writers triumph over imperial time, and the plausibility of his narrative rests on his spatial representation of time. Imperial time is geographically located in Greenwich, and people are organized in relation to that location, as imperial time “subsum[es] all temporality within one benevolent and spacious system of cartography” (88). Modernists challenge this imperial time “by resituting temporal processes within more meaningfully, contextually determined and variable social patterns” (14-15). For example, Woolf pits against Big Ben’s authoritarian time “more meaningful social linkages that resist the precision, proportion, and conversion of imperial time” (126). In other words, according to Barrows, Woolf challenges the imposition of imperial time by affirming social time: “Clarissa’s social project to ‘combine’ and ‘create’ meaningful patterns of temporal organization across social divides arguably mirrors modernism’s larger narrative project of forging alternative networks of temporal connection” (127).

In the above passage Barrows uses spatializing language (“patterns,” “divides,” “networks,” “connection”) to make time seem more manageable. If time were represented as flowing and passing away as soon as it comes into being, and escaping our representational language (as de Man suggests), it would be harder to maintain Barrows’ critical narrative in which modernists rise above imperial time and triumph over it through art. Instead, Barrows translates the modernists’ engagement with time into the language of territorial dispute. Spatial
representation takes the harm out of time—it does not flow, it does not overwhelm writers. Time is fixed in space so that writers can mold it into different social “configurations” and affirm these local temporalities against geographically specific imperial time.

As my survey has shown, critics and scholars from Wilson to Barrows, despite their varying emphases, have consistently discussed time in a positive light, and many of them have done so by using spatializing language. The problem with such an approach is that it reinforces the narrative of transcendence or aesthetic redemption, thus obscuring the other aspect of modernist time that I have discussed in the previous section. Once we restore the sense of flux that is so important to modernist literature, we will start to see the modernists’ more complex and troubled relationship to time.

**Temporality of Reading: Syntax as Form**

The problem is that it is hard to talk about the representation of experiential time, or “time flowing,” without using spatializing language. The present by definition is momentary, but our perception of it is not so because we perceive it as continuous with the past and the future. In the words of William James, our consciousness is such that when we perceive a sensation, it is never abrupt or separate from the previous sensation but comes with “the lingerings of the past dropping successively away, and the incomings of the future making up the loss” (12). No wonder we naturally translate time into space. Even the most basic expression of all—“time passes”—represents time as moving in space.

I am not arguing against the spatialization of time per se, but I maintain that when this spatialization happens in literary criticism, it obscures a more fluid, negative representation of time. What exacerbates this confusion between time and space is the way literary criticism often depends on the spatial understanding of literary form, both in fiction and poetry. In the study of
modernist time, fiction has received more critical attention than poetry, and one reason for this is that narrative, the way writers manage fictional time, is an obvious place to look for modernist temporality. It is true that narrative registers temporal experience, but it insists on a particular kind of end-directed temporality that may blind us to manifestations of different, contradictory temporal models. This critical assumption is most evident in the work of narratology. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode argues that fiction writers use narrative to redeem *chronos*, a mere succession of events, into *kairos*, a point in time “charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (47). Similarly, in *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks maintains that “plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving” (12). They pull the reader forward by what Roland Barthes calls *la passion du sens*, which Brooks translates as “the passion for meaning and the passion of meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle” (19).

Paul Ricoeur agrees with Brooks that the story moves toward the end, from which arises “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story” (“Narrative Time” 171): “Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions. But this backward look is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story” (174). Narrative, in other words, is a spatializing device that promotes teleological temporality while downplaying the temporality of individual sentences that deviate from this end-directed momentum.

This spatial and teleological understanding of form is prevalent in poetry criticism as well. In “The Heresy of Paraphrase” Cleanth Brooks emphasizes the spatial organization of
poetry geared toward the resolution of conflict: “The essential structure of a poem… resembles that of architecture or painting: it is a pattern of resolved stresses” (203). It is true that Brooks quickly switches from this spatializing language (“structure,” “pattern”) to temporal language, but his emphasis on spatial order remains the same: “Or, to move closer still to poetry by considering the temporal arts, the structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition. It is a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme” (203).

Like Kermode, Brooks emphasizes the sense of an ending that gives a poem spatial order. According to Brooks’ scheme, any conflict in attitude, language, and images should be considered retrospectively from the end of a poem. Just as the end of the novel turns a series of otherwise independent events into a point charged with meaning, the end of a poem turns what has preceded it into a harmonized, spatial form. Brooks claims that this backward look enacts “the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude” (206-7). Even when he emphasizes the temporal development of a poem, he subordinates it to this overarching spatial pattern. Poetry, he goes on to argue, is more like drama than music, for its unity emerges from “a dramatic process, not a logical; it represents an equilibrium of forces, not a formula” (207). The takeaway is the sense of order or “equilibrium” that awaits at the end of a poem. In Poetic Closure, Barbara Herrnstein Smith voices this assumption more clearly, arguing that poetic closure gives not only “the feeling of finality, completion, and composure,” but also “ultimate unity and coherence to the reader’s experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design” (36).
To move away from this notion of closed, spatialized time, we need to recover the representation of unclosed, fluid time in modernist literature. In my dissertation I will focus on the rhythm of the sentence—the way it unfolds on the page, word by word—as opposed to patterns, like narrative, that may be thought of as spatializing. Such focused attention to one of the basic building blocks in literature is counter-intuitive because we are often encouraged to think about bigger pictures. But I am not alone in suggesting a more dynamic, temporal understanding of the sentence. In “Composition as Explanation” Gertrude Stein describes her writing as taking place in what she calls “the continuous present”: “Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. Everything is not the same as the time when of the composition and the time in the composition is different” (523). Composition is “always going to be different” because each sentence of hers begins afresh. According to Steven Meyer, Stein’s works invite the reader to “attend to [sentences] much as she did: painstakingly, word by word, as children do in mastering the first and second of the three R’s until procedures necessary for fluency finally, finally, become habitual” (270). This word-by-word approach to writing, as if to re-experience the act of composition, makes her sentences “visible,” physically alive and “exemplary of what [William] James characterized as ‘reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will’” (Meyer 271). This understanding of the sentence differs from a more spatial, static understanding encouraged by the act of diagramming. Stein’s approach emphasizes the very processes of writing and reading, the concrete and temporal experience of encountering words on the page.

Stein’s understanding of the sentence is similar to my temporal reading of syntax, but her temporality is different from that of her modernist peers I will be analyzing. Stein’s emphasis on
the continuous present excludes the awareness of special moments passing away before they are represented by language. Stein’s basic tense is the present tense of composition, with little reaching out to the past or to the future. This difference in temporal sensibility may be why her minute attention to the sentence has not been applied to our readings of other modernist writers like Woolf, whose sentences are equally complex and experimental (especially in *The Waves*), but who is constantly aware of the disjunction between the present and the past. In Woolf’s fictional world, “now” quickly turns into “then” before language can represent its immediacy. My study focuses on the syntactic representation of this temporal gap. Although Stein does not figure in my dissertation in this regard, her understanding of the sentence points us to one of the most neglected aspects of modernist studies—modernists’ difficult style and what it says about their temporality.

Such an approach to the sentence has larger implications in our understanding of the term “form.” As we have seen, formal analysis of both fiction and poetry tends to encourage spatialization, for example, by thinking about narrative and poetic structure. But more recent studies have brought the term “form” closer to Stein’s way of approaching the sentence. While “form” often suggests a pattern or design, Angela Leighton emphasizes the fluidity of its definition. Surveying the usage history of “form,” she points out that, depending on the context, it can be abstract or concrete, matter or spirit. For example, it can take “a” or “the,” or drop the article all together to take on a different meaning: “Although it looks like a fixed shape, a permanent configuration or ideal, whether in eternity, in the mind, or on the page, in fact form is mobile, versatile. It remains open to distant senses, distortions, to the push-and-pull of opposites or cognates” (3).
Similarly, Derek Attridge recommends a more dynamic understanding of poetic form by emphasizing, *contra* Brooks, the temporality of reading process: “The event of the poem takes places as part of the event of its reading; outside of its readings, it is nothing but a structure of inert signs” (*Moving Words* 29). Attridge emphasizes the fact that a poem is “a formal event, involving… shifts in register, allusions to other discourses (literary and non-literary), rhythmic patterning, linking rhymes, movements of syntax, echoing of sounds: all operating in a temporal medium to surprise, lull, intrigue, satisfy” (29). While Brooks subordinates all this to the sense of ending in a poem and the spatial pattern that emerges from this backward look, Attridge emphasizes the very process of reading, in which we sound each word as we read, line by line. This voicing is crucial because “insofar as a poem is an oral phenomenon . . . it is dependent on temporality, albeit a ‘staged’ temporality, rather than one which unfolds in real time” (39). By going back to the oral origin of poetry, and hence putting back poetic form in time, Attridge reminds us of how a poem produces meaning in the reader: it is through the temporal process of reading a poem word by word.³

The sustained examination of syntax will help us recover the temporality of reading back into criticism and shed light on the representation of fluid, experiential time in modernist literature. When we read modernist literature with attention to the tempo of the sentence, the issue of affirmative temporality becomes more complex. This reading practice will illuminate the

³ For Attridge’s more detailed discussion of rhythm, see *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). In an interview, Attridge connects his interest in rhythm to his “insistence on the temporality of the literary work . . . in the sense that it exists as an event in a reading rather than an object to be perceived in a single atemporal instance…. To emphasize the role of rhythm in the literary work is also to bring out the part played by the physical body in our responses.” See *Derek Attridge in Conversation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), p. 51.
modernists’ representation of the present as negative and the self as diminished and inundated by temporal flux.

**Temporal Form in Practice: Pater and Hardy**

In this section I want to demonstrate my methodology of reading syntax as a measuring rod for a writer’s temporality. My two examples—Walter Pater and Thomas Hardy—belong to the generation preceding that of the modernist writers I will be analyzing. Both writers are often thought to have influenced or prefigured modernists in their temporal sensibility. But rather than assuming this continuity, I will examine Pater’s emphasis on the moment for the moment’s sake and Hardy’s turn-of-the-century pessimism from the perspective of syntactic tempo. As we will see, both of these writers are interested in capturing an intense vision, but are aware that such visionary moments cannot last long. The close examination of their syntax will show that while Pater tries to ignite his fading vision, Hardy acknowledges its momentariness and foregrounds his more pessimistic temporal sensibility.

Pater is known for his complex sentences, but not much has been said about the effect of such stylistic difficulty, especially in relation to his famous pronouncement on the moment for the moment’s sake. Pater is regarded as a precursor to modernism for his emphasis on the intensely subjective temporal experience that individuates us against the debilitating force of socialization. In his “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater writes, “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. Failure is to form habits…” (120). But Pater is a precursor in another way, that is, in his self-consciousness that such moment cannot be sustained for long. As Catherine Gallagher has argued, Pater was apprehensive that such ecstatic moments were always shadowed by their imminent death: “the pluckiness of Pater’s determination, the almost theatrical resoluteness of his present-ness, points
as well to the jaws of time yawning in the background, like hell’s mouth in a medieval morality play” (242). In a passage below from the Renaissance, Gallagher detects “a continuous awareness of death’s imminence” (242): “… we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest in art and song. For our one chance is in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (Pater 120). Here Pater’s language has an air of crisis, of the end approaching, as it suggests that life is such a brief “interval” that we only have “one chance” to intensify this fleeting moment.

Pater’s complex temporality—the desire to prolong an intense moment and the awareness that he cannot sustain it because the moment passes away quickly—is mirrored by the tempo of his sentences. In the following sentence from the Renaissance, Pater’s syntax enacts the intensity of a moment and its transience. It is the final sentence of his chapter on Joachim du Bellay:

A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weather-vane, a wind-mill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment, —and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect; but it leaves a relish behind it, a longing that the accident may happen again.

(85)

The first clause captures a moment of visionary transfiguration and prolongs it by a series of appositive nouns (“a weather-vane, a wind-mill, a winnowing flail…”). The appositives suspend the sentence for a while by elaborating on “a trivial thing,” postponing syntactic closure and making the vision seem to last longer. But this moment of transfiguration is soon shadowed by the last appositive noun that introduces a traditional symbol of death and mortality: “the dust in the barn door.”
This death image clouds Pater’s visionary light, registering his awareness that such intense moments pass away as soon as they come into being. He acknowledges the brevity of his vision by describing it as “a moment,” which quickly disappears: “the dust in the barn door; a moment, —and the thing has vanished.” Here the imagistic intensity of “A sudden light” is reduced to the most generic word “thing” (“and the thing has vanished”). Or it may be more correct to say that we are not even allowed to see the vision vanish—“the thing has vanished”—because it is so short-lived that it has gone without our witnessing its disappearance.

But Pater refuses to end his sentence on a note of temporal diminution, and this is what differentiates him from his modernist successors I will be examining in my dissertation. He extends the sentence with a semicolon, although he could have concluded it and started a new sentence. Instead, he offsets the suggestion of the moment’s death by introducing the subjunctive tense where the same moment of transfiguration “may happen again.” Ending his sentence with the hope for temporal renewal, Pater dispels his awareness of a fading vision.

When we turn from Pater to Hardy, however, this self-consciousness that special moments pass away is overwhelmingly present with little hope for temporal renewal. In this sense Hardy is closer to the modernists I will be examining in sharing their negative temporality. Originally published in a magazine as “By the Century’s Deathbed” in 1900, “The Darkling Thrush” begins by describing a desolate landscape where the previous century is interred, and then the speaker hears a birdsong that suggests the possibility of rejuvenating this dead century. In tracing this narrative, I focus on Hardy’s syntactic tempo to measure his temporality:

I leant upon a coppice gate

When Frost was spectre-gray,

And Winter’s dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

(ll. 1-8)

The first stanza evokes a feeling of enervation. The speaker leans upon the gate, as if he is too tired to stand on his own feet. Hardy’s “Frost” cannot perform its secret ministry like Coleridge’s—it is “spectre-gray” like an old man or his ghost. The sun is “weakening,” so human inhabitants seek “their household fires” to protect themselves from the cold winter, which announces the end of the year. All of these details point to the temporal sensibility we have identified in Pater: a sense of temporal diminution, of history coming to an end.

This apocalyptic temporality is rendered in a slow, monotonous tempo. Much of the first stanza is written in mechanically regular iambics (e.g. “I leant upon a coppice gate / When Frost was spectre-gray”). The rhymes are equally monotonous: the rhyme pattern is abab cdcd, but it does not sound as varied as the rhyme scheme suggests, because each quatrain of the first stanza rhymes the same vowel (ei in “gate,” “gray,” “desolate,” “day”; ai in “sky,” “lyres,” “nigh,” “fires”). Read in this way, the actual rhyme scheme of the first stanza becomes aaaa bbbb, which does not suggest as much rhythmical progression as the standard abab cdcd rhyme scheme would do. The century has come to an end, and Hardy’s monotonous rhythm mirrors this temporal stagnation.

Hardy’s syntax reflects this temporal stasis, deadlock. In the second stanza there is no active verb to animate this ghostly landscape:
The land’s sharp features seemed to be
The Century’s corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunk, hard, and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

(ll. 9-16)

Human history is figured as a “corpse outleant.” There is no possibility of reviving it because every sign of life that might have continued from the beginning of human history has now decayed (“The ancient pulse of germ and birth / Was shrunk, hard, and dry”). Just as Time is dead, the landscape does not suggest any temporal flow because the verbs that describe it are all linking verbs with no sense of action (“seemed to be,” “Was shrunk,” “Seemed fervourless”). Moreover, when “seemed to be” is omitted halfway into the stanza, the poem starts to read like a paratactic catalogue of nouns, and there is no verb to suggest the passage of time—it is all stagnation: “The land’s sharp features seemed to be / The Century’s corpse outleant, / His crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind his death-lament.” Nor does the speaker have any will to break out of this stasis, for he simply *defines* the situation—A is B, C is like D—rather than driving his sentence, like Pater, beyond the recognition of Time’s death toward the hope for its renewal.

There is a brief moment in the poem where Hardy’s speaker makes the same move as Pater—he gestures toward the possibility of rejuvenating this faded historical moment. This
suggestion of hope is signaled by the way in which Hardy’s syntactic tempo speeds up. In the third stanza, a birdsong momentarily breaks the stasis of the previous stanzas:

At once a voice arose among

The bleak twigs overhead

In a full-hearted evensong

Of joy illimited;

(ll. 17-20)

Into this dead landscape, a nameless “voice” injects a more hopeful note of “joy illimited.” Accordingly, Hardy’s syntax quickens and his rhythm sounds less mechanical. The reappearance of an active verb, “arose,” suggests some action and temporal flow—the poem’s narrative is finally resumed. Moreover, after the stasis of the second stanza, Hardy’s sentence reads much faster due to the first strong enjambment in the poem (“among / The bleak twigs”) allowing the sentence to spill over across the line ending. The sentence also reads faster because this is the first time that one complete clause is stretched over four lines, so that we keep reading from “At once” to “Of joy illimited” without pause.

But this brief moment of joy is soon overshadowed by the slowing down of the tempo in the second half of the stanza, which reveals the bird to be old and decrepit:

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,

In blast-beruffled plume,

Had chosen thus to fling his soul

Upon the growing gloom.

(ll. 21-24)
Written at the turn of the century, “The Darkling Thrush” is a belated Romantic poem that renders the motif of spontaneous, joyous birdsong irrelevant. Compare Hardy’s “aged thrush” to Shelley’s skylark, whom he addresses, “Thou dost float and run; / Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.” Shelley’s bird is ethereal (“unbodied”), and there is youthful energy and freshness in “run” and “joy whose race is just begun.” In contrast, Hardy’s bird is old and physically unappealing, hardly a symbol of temporal renewal. It is as powerless as his speaker, who leans tiredly against the gate and witnesses the Century’s corpse, being unable to revive it. Accordingly, Hardy’s tempo slows down to mime the bird’s decrepitude: while the first half of the stanza is accelerated by syntax and enjambment and no comma to impede it, the second half is excessively punctuated as if covered with spots of decay that cripple the sentence (“An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small / In blast-beruffled plume”). Although this aged thrush has a Romantic echo in “Had chosen thus to fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom,” recalling Keats’s nightingale (“While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!”), such spontaneous “pouring” is absent from the self-conscious “Had chosen thus to fling his soul,” as if the bird is forcing himself to sing out of desperation.

Hardy’s tempo registers this turn from the hope for temporal renewal to the recognition that it cannot be realized. The modernist writers I will be analyzing make the same move, but it is far more amplified by their disjunctive style. I will be extending my syntactic reading to writers ranging from Virginia Woolf to T. S. Eliot in the hope of showing the intersection between their difficult style and their awareness that special moments pass away beyond the reach of language. Throughout my dissertation, I will also emphasize this negative strain of modernist literature by contrasting these writers with those whose temporality is more positive.
and fits well with the standard account of modernism. In doing so, I will show variations of modernist temporality and expand our understanding of how modernists represented time.

**Preview**

The first half of my dissertation will focus on prose fiction, and the second half on poetry. In Chapter 1, I will analyze the fiction of Virginia Woolf, particularly *The Waves*, with an eye to the way in which her syntax dramatizes her self-consciousness of special moments passing away. Scholarship on *The Waves* has focused on its unique structure of alternating an italicized section that describes a natural landscape with a soliloquy section in which six main characters take turns and speak in poetic language. This structure has been often read as representing Woolf’s desire to unify natural time and human time into the condition of timelessness. Close attention to her syntactic tempo will show that Woolf’s syntax in fact highlights the contrast between the two: while natural time is continuous and eternal, human life is transient. Woolf’s characters suffer from this awareness of special moments constantly passing away. I will further discuss Woolf’s syntax and temporality by considering the relationship between narrative and poetic language in her work. I will focus on moments where her sentences break out of the narrative into the present tense of figurative language. Such moments seem to fit with the standard account of Woolf’s interest in perpetuating “moments of being,” intensely felt moments that are radically different from the habitual present of daily life. But Woolf’s syntax emphasizes an abrupt return from the figurative present to the narrative past so as to enact the sudden disappearance of such seemingly transcendental moments.

In Chapter 2, I will further consider the relationship between tempo and temporality in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*. The novel is notorious for its difficult poetic style, but few critical accounts have considered how this style functions in the novel. I will argue that Barnes’s style
represents her regressive temporality, in which characters are no longer fully individuated
humans endowed with personal memory. I will first look at Barnes’s narrative syntax and how its
dense hypotaxis constantly subjects her characters to a bigger historical time that diminishes
their individuality. In particular, I will examine one recurring device in the novel—the use of
simile in a subordinate clause—to show how it reduces a character to a historical type over the
course of a sentence. Then I will argue that this pessimistic attitude toward human life is
reflected by Barnes’s use of poetic language. While Woolf uses poetic language to express her
desire for a different world, a better, figurative present in which the passage of time can be
reversed, Barnes uses it without any hope for such temporal renewal. The shadow of the
historical past dominates the novel, reducing wielders of words to mere puppets.

The next two chapters focus on poetry. In Chapter 3, I will analyze the poetry of W. B.
Yeats. Yeats is a problematic figure in discussions of modernism. Some readers have aligned
him with Eliot, Pound and other modernists, while others have considered him as a threshold
figure between the fin de siècle and modernism. I will argue that Yeats shares a lot of similarities
with modernists in terms of the negative temporality I will be discussing throughout my
dissertation. His poetry seems ordered on the surface: formalist readings of Yeats tend to
emphasize his formal mastery, the way he imposes aesthetic order on his temporal experience.
But his syntax is more troubled and troubling, registering his awareness that time is recalcitrant
to the control of his subjectivity. Yeats often looks back to the past in the hope of relocating its
unrealized possibility onto the future, just as he wished to revive the native Irish tradition
through collecting folklore and establishing the Abbey Theatre. His temporality, however, is not
simply revivalist: it is colored by the awareness that such hoped-for temporal renewal may not be
possible. To show this temporal drama, I will examine three poems: “The Fisherman,” “The
“The Fisherman” and “The Tower” stage the poet-speaker struggling to connect the present to the past and the future, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” shows Yeats’s syntax on the verge of falling apart, leaving no hope for temporal renewal as the present moment of political chaos is beyond the speaker’s control.

In Chapter 4 I will examine the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. I will frame my discussion of their temporality by drawing on recent theories of lyric poetry. Lyric poetry has been discussed as an expression of subjectivity, and theorists like Jonathan Culler have emphasized that this subjectivity is strongly rooted in the present moment of speaking. For example, when a speaker utters “I walk,” we are asked to imagine him or her performing this very act in the present moment. I will argue that this lyric theory is found wanting when we examine the poetry of Pound and Eliot, in which the present is no longer an empowered position compared with the more vivid presence of the past. This juxtaposition of the past and the present is registered by their syntax. Juxtaposition is often understood as representing the accelerated tempo of modernity, the simultaneous time in which the present is so dilated as to encompass “the immediate past and future” (Kern 81). But the flipside of this positive modernism is that juxtaposition without copula also makes syntax more fragmentary, moving from compression toward catalogue, a mere piling up of phrase after phrase without organizing consciousness. Yeats’s syntax maintains syntactic coherence through his use of hypotaxis, but Eliot and Pound complicate this syntactic and temporal order by disturbing it, as if the self behind syntax is overwhelmed by the flux of temporal experience and unable to order it except through cataloguing each passing moment. The presence of syntactic disorder will complicate the positive assumption of modernism by revealing not an intensely subjective temporal experience but its diminution. I will illustrate how this syntactic attenuation mirrors the diminution of
subjectivity by analyzing Pound’s Canto 1 and Eliot’s “Gerontion” and “The Game of Chess” section from *The Waste Land*.

In the concluding chapter, I will briefly reflect on the critical implications of my temporal reading. First, my detailed reading of syntactic tempo is a response to the predominance of historicist approach in the current literary studies. As Rita Felski has recently pointed out, the overemphasis on historical context not only drowns the individuality of a text but also discourages us from asking why certain texts continue to affect readers across time. I am not disagreeing with the importance of historicization, but I argue that the current mode tends to represent the text as static and caught in the thick web of historical context, and that temporal reading will restore the dimension of temporality to the relationship between text and context, and between text and reader. Once we start reading sentences in time, word by word, the works of modernist writers start to reveal how their temporal experience reverberates within the text, in the twists and turns of their syntax.

Second, my temporal reading presents a new understanding of form best suited for modernist literature. Unlike static formal patterns such as stanza, meter, and narrative, temporal form acknowledges the presence of disorder that cannot be easily translated into the organic whole of spatial form. As we will see, there are many sentences in modernist works that do not directly contribute to the formal coherence of, say, narrative or characterization. Such moments of stylistic disjunction allow us to see modernist writers grappling with experiential time—not time as statically reconstructed from historical reading, but time flowing, time represented as *lived*. It is this fluid, chaotic perception of time during the period of rapid change in the early twentieth century that these sentences register. They acknowledge that language cannot impose aesthetic order on the deluge of experience by freezing it into spatial form. The difficulty of the
modernist style originates from this recognition of failure—from the tension between the hope for aesthetic redemption and the impossibility of realizing it.
Chapter 1: The Representation of the Present and the Temporality of the Sentence in
Virginia Woolf’s The Waves

In The Modernist Fiction, Stephen Kern contrasts the linear progression of time in realist fiction to the modernists’ way of “valorizing the present”: “the text time of [modernists’] novels paused to dilate the present of their characters by means of a continuous present tense, beginning again, the inelastic present, moments of being, and moments bienheureux” (105). Kern characterizes the modernist representation of the present on two assumptions. Not only does he take the modernist “now” to be spatial (“dilate the present”), he regards it as entirely affirmative, as his repeated uses of “valorize” and its synonyms demonstrate: “Stein valorized the present,” “Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner, and even Proust viewed the present as a vibrant locus of experience for the story time as it bulked up the text time of their novels”; “The proximity of death in [Mrs. Dalloway’s] thoughts, intensified after learning of Septimus’ suicide, valorizes being alive in the present”; “Joyce celebrates the present through Bloom” (102).

But Kern’s account of the modernist present addresses only one side of modernist temporality. Virginia Woolf’s The Waves is a case in point. Although The Waves is, as J.W. Graham calls it, “a representative text of modernism” (“Introduction” 13) for its stylistic experimentation, it does not endorse the kind of affirmative temporality Kern claims to be characteristic of modernism. The Waves portrays the present not as spatial or affirmative but as disjunctive, as a moment that cannot sustain itself by joining continuous time. While Woolf’s previous novel To the Lighthouse limits the transient nature of time to its middle section, “Time Passes,” The Waves relentlessly insists on it throughout. Rhoda, one of the six main characters in the novel, gives the fullest expression to this sentiment that saturates the novel: “I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps up on me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot
make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view” (130). Rhoda has no end, no telos to which each “now” contributes to create a temporal continuum. Bernard echoes this temporal sensibility when he says, “We have no ceremonies, only private dirges and no conclusions, only violent sensations, each separate…. Arrows of sensation strike from my spine, but without order” (157).

Such negative temporality is the flipside of Bergsonian durée or Paterian moment-for-moment’s-sake: if each moment is perceived as unique, individuated, hence different from the preceding moment, one’s temporal experience becomes fragmentary and chaotic. Indeed, Wyndham Lewis critiqued Bergson’s affirmation of the present because “submission to a giant hyperbolic close-up of a moment” breaks up “all individual continuity” (13), making us mere receptors of intense sensations. Such sensory bombardment can be dehumanizing, as Bernard suggests: “I am yawning. I am glutted with sensations. I am exhausted with the strain and the long, long time—twenty-five minutes, half an hour—that I have held myself alone outside the machine. I grow numb; I grow stiff. How shall I break up this numbness which discredits my sympathetic heart?” (158)

Although such fear for time pervades the novel, scholars have long preferred to discuss a more affirmative side of Woolf’s temporality in the vein of Kern’s account of modernist literature. Despite the fact that Woolf represents time as continuously passing away and beyond one’s control, scholars have used spatial metaphors to discuss it, and in doing so, have frozen
and rendered harmless the very nature of experiential time that troubles the novel’s main characters.¹

A survey of criticism on The Waves will show how pervasive this general tendency is. Many readers of the novel have focused on its unique structure and how it represents Woolf’s desire to transcend time. The novel alternates two sections that are vastly different in language and tense. The italicized sections describe the course of the sun from dawn to dusk in the past tense. The soliloquy sections stage the six main characters, who take turns and speak in poetic language, often in the present tense. James Naremore does not use explicitly spatial terms to characterize The Waves, but he strips the novel of any temporal movement by claiming that its structure is “a manifestation of that timeless unity Mrs. Woolf continually striving to render” (151). This timelessness, Naremore argues, comes from “the sameness of things in the book, the unrelieved poetic intensity with which every experience is presented, and the static atmosphere that is created as one soliloquy follows another” (152).

Mary Ann Gillies echoes Naremore’s observation about the novel’s uniformity, seeing no difference between the italicized sections and the soliloquies: “[Woolf] treats the impression of timelessness by bracketing her prose passages with poetic ones that describe the ceaseless rhythm of life: while the progress of the sun through the sky represents the daily pattern of individual lives, the waves breaking on shore represent eternity—the passing of time through generations of life” (126). Like Naremore, Gillies uses atemporal descriptors—“timelessness,”

¹ Other examples of the characters’ awareness of time passing include: “Suddenly a bee booms in my ear,” said Neville. “It is here; it is past” (11); “‘This is here,’ said Jinny. ‘This is now. But soon we shall go’” (23). The next two examples are spoken by Bernard: “Everybody seems to be doing things for this moment only; and never again. Never again. The urgency of it all is fearful” (30); “Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out” (229).
“ceaseless,” “eternity”—and spatializes the novel as a “pattern.” She goes so far as to read the whole novel as one long *durée*: “Woolf weaves together the prose and poetic passages by having both share the same imagery—waves and light primarily—thereby creating a prolonged moment of being that captures the characters’ lives, the life of their era, and all of history. In doing this she is Bergsonian” (127). Gillies agrees with Naremore that the novel is characterized by the “sameness” of its recurring imagery, and she thereby makes no distinction between the two sections except that of style (“prose and poetic passages”).

Unlike Naremore and Gillies, Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the novel with an eye to its temporality in the context of Stein’s “continuous present,” but her language is spatial throughout:

> Virtually every sentence begins again. But with a slight alteration, indicative of Woolf’s modification of Stein’s extremism: in Woolf a unit of several sentences may repeat in a psalm-like pattern…. And in Woolf, structures of repetition, changing scale as they do not in Stein, form arcs across the terrain of writing: the description of the sun illuminating a still life of cups, chairs, pots will arc among the sections, each moment recalling, alluding to another in a weaving dependent upon remembering. (106)

DuPlessis is right to emphasize Woolf’s preoccupation with the present by following Stein’s lead, but in doing so, she wrongly extends Stein’s affirmative “beginning again and again” to *The Waves*. Moreover, she freezes Woolf’s representation of time in spatial metaphors: “pattern,” “structure,” “arcs across the terrain of writing.” Like Gillies, DuPlessis sees the novel as a spatial field in which certain words and images are repeated to form a pattern. At one point she even adopts their atemporal language: “The waves are an allover *perpetual* pattern of ‘beginning again’” (106, my emphasis).
Such spatial and atemporal reading still persists, as in a 2012 essay by Maureen Chun. Chun carries DuPlessis’s focus on language further by drawing parallels between the Woolf of *The Waves* and writers like Mallarmé and Gertrude Stein who shared an emphasis on the materiality of words freed from meaning. The novel, she claims, “embodies Woolf’s attempt to unsettle the ineradicable symbolic function of language, to disturb the abstractions of signification, by renewing a sense of words as things” (55). Emphasizing the physical presence of words on the page, Chun equates the novel to spatial art: “though the language of narrative is inevitably committed to representation, the very words that compose images remain things of the world, both sonorous as music and material as paint” (54-55). Chun also agrees with the other readers on the static uniformity of the novel, pointing out that the novel circulates imagistic leitmotifs across the two sections: “The seascape interludes further depersonalize the represented consciousness of the soliloquies in forming with them an imagistic confluence…. Images of waves and birds by the shore interpenetrate the soliloquies and the interludes” (57). Comparing the novel to a pictorial “image,” Chun reads the novel spatially, hence doing away with the novel’s representation of experiential time.

Martin Hägglund points out that this type of spatial reading, which assumes the condition of timelessness, is prevalent in Woolf criticism. Surveying scholarly discussions of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Hägglund concludes that Woolf’s aesthetic of moments “has been read as aspiring to a state of being that is exempt from the condition of temporality” (17). We can see this critical assumption most clearly in Mary Ann Gillies’ Bergsonian reading of Woolf. She argues:

Far from being a moment out of time, Woolf’s moments of being are instances of pure duration, moments during which past and present time not only literally coexist, but
during which one is aware of their coexistence. In a Bergsonian sense, these are moments of pure *durée*…. By penetrating to the level of *durée*, Woolf seeks to depict life as it occurs on a temporal, rather than spatial level. (109)

Gillies’ intensifiers (“pure,” “literally”) protest too much, trying to drown a note of contradiction: on the one hand, Woolf tries to “depict life as it occurs on a temporal, rather than spatial level,” but on the other, it can be conceived only in spatial terms, as “pure duration.”

Gillies is aware of this contradiction: “While Woolf’s moments might appear to contradict Bergson’s insistence that life is vital only in its flux and not when it is static or spatialized, Bergson accepted that representation meant a spatialization of flux” (109). In other words, Gillies suggests that the representation of “moments of being” inevitably involves spatialization.

Hägglund argues, however, that Woolf’s “moments” do not aspire toward this spatial, timeless condition because what draws her to these moments in the first place is their transience. That is, it is because a moment passes away that she feels attached to it: “If we are moved by how Woolf records atoms of experience, it is because we care about the survival of the ephemeral—of incidents and details that may be lost. The pathos of Woolf’s *moments of living* stems from the fact that they are always already *moments of dying*” (78). Given this logic, he suggests, the problem of spatializing time is that in doing so, we deprive time of what makes us care for it in the first place—its momentariness:

\[
\ldots \textit{time is nothing in itself}; \textit{it is nothing but the negativity that is intrinsic to succession.}
\]

It follows that time cannot be a virtual coexistence, since it does not have the power to \textit{be} anything or \textit{do} anything on its own. Indeed, time cannot be anything or do anything without a spatialization that constrains the power of the virtual in making it dependent on material conditions. (15)
Spatialization obscures time’s negativity by creating the illusion of temporal succession. The Woolf scholars I have examined commit this error by turning away from the transience of the present *The Waves* dramatizes, and by misrepresenting it as spatial and timeless.

This critical assumption is based on the idea of Woolf’s much-cited “moments of being,” but her own account of temporality is more ambivalent than what Kern terms as “valorizing the present.” According to Woolf, our lives are made up of ordinary moments of “non-being” (“A Sketch of the Past” 70). But this temporal continuum is interrupted violently when we experience a “blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life” (72). It is through writing that she can turn this violent “moment” into a benign moment of being:

… it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together (72).

This artistic conversion gives her “the strongest pleasure,” “the rapture.” The present by itself, with no artistic intervention, can hurt and remain discontinuous unless this temporal rift is filled in. It is the presence of the past and its continuity with the present moment that gives a sense of order, as Woolf says: “For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else” (98). The present should not be abrupt with no continuity with the past, but “must be smooth, habitual. For this reason—that it destroys the fullness of life—any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters” (98). The characters of *The Waves* are hyperconscious of the present’s break from the past. They perceive it as abrupt
rather than habitual, and it is the act of writing that can make this broken present whole by connecting it with the past.

But in *The Waves* Woolf calls this idea of aesthetic redemption into question by saturating the novel with the awareness that any special moment slips away from the grasp of representational language. At this point, it is useful to turn to Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” where he questions the modern critical tendency to elide the temporal gap between representation and the object of representation. De Man elaborates on this gap by differentiating the symbol from the allegory. He argues that the symbol refers to “a total, single, and universal meaning,” which is “endlessly suggestive in the indefiniteness of its meaning” (188). It blurs the distinction between “experience and the representation of this experience” (188), affirming the power of language to “transform all individual experience directly into general truth.” In other words, the symbol allows us to move easily from the temporal and individual to the spatial and universal, as it is “founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests” (189). The allegory, however, acknowledges the gap between experience and representation, for it refers to “a meaning that it does not itself constitute,” the signified and signifier never fully coinciding with each other (188). The allegory “designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (207). De Man argues that since the nineteenth century, critics and scholars have given priority to the symbol, the totalizing image that glosses over such gaps between signified and signifier.

In the Woolf criticism I have surveyed, this priority of the symbol occurs frequently, for most of these scholars base their discussions on the image of spatialized time despite the fact that
Woolf’s characters struggle with precisely this gap between the represented and representation. They are conscious of their inability to fix time, perpetuate it. Woolf’s own syntactic tempo captures this dilemma of representation and testifies to her self-consciousness of the ever-fading present.

To avoid the spatialization of time, I will read The Waves on its own temporal terms by paying exclusive attention to Woolf’s sentences. For the sentence is time-bound: however long, however suspended, it must come to an end and give way to the next sentence, just as each moment comes to an end and yields to the next. I will argue that her sentences—their syntactic tempo and rhythm—dramatize the passing away of the present. This is contrary to the symbol in de Man’s sense, for Woolf’s language acknowledges its own temporal nature by showing how the special moment she tries to capture fades over the course of the sentence’s unfolding.

I will then consider the tension between Woolf’s sentences and narrative to characterize what kind of temporality each represents for her. In her earlier works there are moments when a sentence suspends the narrative and enters a different, figurative time that has little to do with the actual story or the narrative past, only to disappear quickly when the narrative is resumed. Woolf discussed the effect of this stylistic swerve in a series of essays, where she meditated on the possibility of incorporating the special, rhetorically heightened moments of poetry into the ordinary, linear time of narrative. In The Waves Woolf tried to overcome this difference in genre by minimizing the narrative voice and intensifying the characters’ perception of the present in poetic language. But instead of realizing this fusion between poetry and fiction, the tempo of Woolf’s sentences emphasizes the impossibility of sustaining the poetic intensity of the affirmative present.

**Tempo and Temporality in The Waves**
The Waves underscores the transience of the present moment by dramatizing the conflict of two temporal imaginaries, giving each a distinct syntactic and grammatical character. An italicized section describes the continuous time of the natural world. It is introduced by the very first words of the novel: “The sun had not yet risen” (7). This opening sentence sets the natural landscape in continuous time, as the past perfect points back beyond the narrative past, while “yet” looks forward to the future in which the sun will rise. Continuous time is further enacted by the grammar and syntax of this opening section:

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.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. (7)

The impression of ongoing, continuous action arises from the repetition of present participles and the temporal adverb “Gradually” throughout this section: “Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon”; “Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear”; “Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze.” Moreover, sentences in the italicized sections are generally longer than those in the soliloquies, often extended by “as” and “and,” both of which join one sentence to another to suggest the simultaneity and continuity of two actions, respectively. Time flows as one moment is connected to the next one, and this pattern goes on “perpetually.”

Woolf contrasts the gradualism of the italicized sections with the temporal disjunction of the soliloquies. Halfway through the novel, the six main characters have a farewell dinner with
Percival, who is leaving for India. The dinner stands for the desire to crystalize fleeting moments, as Bernard says: “We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time” (146).

But for humans, such continuous time is not available, and this temporal sensibility is rendered in a syntactic tempo radically different from that of the italicized sections. Now the dinner is over, and Percival is leaving. Neville perceives this whole action not as one temporal flow but as a series of discrete moments:

“Now the agony begins; now the horror has seized me with its fangs,” said Neville. “Now the cab comes; now Percival goes. What can we do to keep him? How bridge the distance between us? How fan the fire so it blazes for ever? How signal to all this to come that we, who stand in the street in the lamplight, loved Percival? Now Percival is gone.” (147)

The dominant tense here is what J. W. Graham calls “the pure present” (“I walk,” “I ripple”), which further reinforces the representation of the disjunctive present in the soliloquies:

The pure present can convey an external action as it occurs only if the action is momentary. When it is used to represent external actions, therefore, it makes them seem momentary, no matter what their actual duration might be in life: they happen so rapidly that we feel them recede into the past even as they occur. (96)

The use of the pure present in Neville’s soliloquy intensifies the now-ness of each sentence. The progressive tense (“the cab is coming,” “Percival is going”) could have made actions more
durational. The pure present reduces them to flickers.\(^2\) Similarly, the recurring temporal adverb in this passage and throughout the soliloquies is “now”: while “gradually” lets time pass slowly and continuously, “now” is abrupt, registering each moment as short-lived because it is disconnected from the preceding and subsequent one. Each sentence is an epitaph on the moment it renders. Woolf could have written, following the gradualism of the italicized sections, “Now the cab comes and Percival goes.” But she breaks the sentence into two to emphasize the temporal gap between them.

Hence, the dominant syntax in the soliloquies is parataxis: sentences are laid next to each other without any indication of their logical or temporal continuity. In imagist poetry, parataxis or juxtaposition is often used to create what Ezra Pound called “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” a perception so immediate that it bypasses our tendency to organize events into temporal or rational order (“A Retrospect” 4). The parataxis of The Waves works the opposite, for it emphasizes the transience of such intense moments. For example, Jinny imagines herself experiencing an ecstatic moment, which quickly disappears: “We are together, high up, on some Alpine pass. He stands melancholy on the crest of the road. I stoop. I pick a blue flower and fix it, standing on tiptoe to reach him, in his coat. There! That is my moment of ecstasy. Now it is over. Now slackness and indifference invade us” (104). As soon as Jinny affirms her “moment of ecstasy” as immediately present (“There!”), it vanishes in the next sentence (“Now it is over”). There is a tone of desperation in Jinny’s deictic words such as “That is my moment of ecstasy” and “There!” as if she is trying to pin down her moment of ecstasy in space so that it will last a little longer. But the repetition of “now” insists that the moment has passed, leaving her with “slackness and indifference.”

Woolf seems to have consciously introduced “now” in order to emphasize the ever-passing nature of the present. For example, in a draft version of the following sentence, Susan speaks of Bernard in a longer syntactic tempo: “You pull at my skirts, Bernard, so that I may pull you on, while you make phrases; & escape, like an air ball whose string slips out of one’s hand, higher up & higher up through the layers of the leaves to the topmost bough & then away” (414/4.107). In the final version the sentence is broken up into several, many of which are prefaced with “now”: “‘Now you trail away,’ said Susan, ‘making phrases. Now you mount like an air-ball’s string, higher and higher through the layers of the leaves, out of reach. Now you lag. Now you tug at my skirts, looking back, making phrases’” (18). The earlier sentence puts Bernard’s actions in causal (“so that”) and temporal (“while”) relations, whereas the final version renders them as distinct from one another, each replacing the one before.

Woolf’s temporality here is Bergsonian to an extreme: there is no time beyond one’s individual perception, so that each moment strikes the perceiver as unique. But as a result, human time is represented as fragmentary and discontinuous, as opposed to the continuous natural time of the italicized sections. Individual time cannot participate in such collective time, and as a result, one “now” disappears as soon as it is perceived and replaced by a new “now” without forming any temporal continuum. Woolf’s clipped sentences enact such individual perception.

Woolf’s negative temporality becomes more evident when we compare it to E. M. Forster’s representation of the present. In the following passage from Howards End, Margaret and Helen are out in the garden at Howards End:

The present flowed by them like a stream. The tree rustled. It had made music before they were born, and would continue after their deaths, but its song was of the moment. The
moment had passed. The tree rustled again. Their senses were sharpened, and they seemed to apprehend life. Life passed. The tree rustled again. (269)

The river image of the first sentence (“The present flowed by them like a stream”) suggests that the present is flowing continuously from the past and into the future. The music the tree makes also reinforces this sense of fluid continuity: it was heard in the past and will “continue” long after Margaret and Helen are gone. It is true that like Woolf, Forster acknowledges that the song is “of the moment,” and in the next sentence, Forster’s tempo is as clipped as Woolf’s, rendering each moment as short-lived (“The moment had passed”). But in Forster’s passage, as soon as the moment dies, the tree rustles again and renews the song: “The moment had passed. The tree rustled again…. Life passed. The tree rustled again.”

The next paragraph reveals what seems to be behind Forster’s novel to assure such temporal continuity and renewal. It is the endurance of the national tradition that makes it possible to imagine time as continuous:

‘Sleep now,’ said Margaret.

The peace of the country was entering into her. It has no commerce with memory, and little with hope. Least of all is it concerned with the hopes of the next five minutes. It is the peace of the present, which passes understanding. Its murmur came ‘now’, and ‘now’ once more as they trod the gravel, and ‘now’ as the moonlight fell upon their father’s sword. (269)

The peace of the present has “no commerce with memory,” but it is not discontinuous with the past. The sentence beginning with “the peace of the present” signals the change of tempo by making Forster’s sentence longer, suggesting that this “country,” where Howards End has resisted the acceleration of modern life, endures. Because of this sense of continuity, Forster
represents a series of “now’s” in one long sentence rather than a series of clipped ones like Woolf: “Its murmur came ‘now,’ and ‘now’ once more as they trod the gravel, and ‘now’ as the moonlight fell upon their father’s sword.” This continuous tempo that mirrors the peace of the present is sanctified by the persistence of tradition suggested by a biblical allusion (“the peace of the present, which passes understanding”), and the father’s ancestral sword, a symbol of continuity between Margaret’s generation and the previous generations.

While Forster represents an easy commerce between natural time and human time in continuous tempo, Woolf severs one from the other and emphasizes their difference. This is most evident in the transition from the fifth italicized section to the subsequent soliloquy. The section break takes us from continuous, renewable natural time to discontinuous and irreversible human time. We can register this temporal difference by tracing how the verb “fell” appears in different syntactic contexts:

The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall. The waves were steeped deep blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping.

“He is dead,” said Neville. “He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass.” (150-51)

In the italicized section, “fell” is a repeatable, renewable action: “One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall”; “The waves fell;
withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping.” Immersed in this onrush of long, continuous sentences, we are surprised to stumble on the elegiac staccato of parataxis in the soliloquy: “‘He is dead,’ said Neville. ‘He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown.’” Each sentence stops short because the fall is fatal and unrepeatable. The waves can fall and fall again, but humans cannot. Woolf’s sentences expand and contract to mime this temporal difference.

Concurrent with this temporal rift is the human desire to bridge it. The scholars I have surveyed single out this desire and discuss it as fully realized, hence making the novel more triumphant than it actually is. In perhaps the longest sentence in the novel, Louis tries to fuse human time with natural time, but his sentence enacts the impossibility of such a project by unraveling off-tempo. He states his ambition to “fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavor” and experiences a vision in which human time is seemingly unified into continuous natural time:

Now grass and trees, the travelling air blowing empty spaces in the blue which they then recover, shaking the leaves which then replace themselves, and our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly. This I see for a second, and shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel, though Percival destroys it, as he blunders off, crushing the grasses, with the small fry trotting subservient after him. Yet it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry. (40)

Louis imagines the present moment (“Now”) as being part of the renewable cycle of nature, and the suspense of his periodic sentence mirrors this duration. The Latinate symmetry of Louis’s sentence grants his vision an air of logical authority: “in the blue which they then recover, shaking the leaves which then replace themselves.” The “which…then” structure and the rhyme
of the Latin prefix underscore the cycle of swift renewal as a matter of course: the blue and the leaves are restored as soon as they vanish. The last grammatical subject in the sentence, “our ring here,” is juxtaposed to this natural cycle, suggesting that humans, too, are part of it, if not of a “better” order.

But here Louis’s sentence starts to falter, as if his vision is already fading: “and our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint at some other order.” After propelling the sentence with the “which…then” structure oiled by a trochee and iambs (shaking the leaves which then replace themselves), Woolf makes it stumble by inserting commas, creating an awkward thudding rhythm (“our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint…”). Even when the sentence finally arrives at the main verb after this long suspense, it ends in an anticlimax of the vague phrase: “hint at some other order.” Louis’s inability to spell out what this order is produces another awkward phrase: “and better, which makes a reason everlastingly.” This final “which” recalls the earlier parallelism that describes the natural cycle of renewal, but there is none of the logical confidence that underpins such a claim.

Indeed, the earlier symmetry is further unbalanced when the suggestion of renewal in “recover” and “replace” fades in the awkwardly phrased “makes a reason everlastingly.” As J. Hillis Miller has rightly pointed out, this is “an odd phrase (reason for what?) but it makes sense if you think of reason as a philosophical term, the equivalent of logos in Greek or Grund in German” (“The Waves as Exploration” 668). Indeed, the word does make sense if we take it as the abstract concept of reason, but Woolf’s phrase is odd because she gives us a false cue to read the word as “a reason”—the ersatz Reason diminished by the indefinite article.

Hence, the logical climax that Louis’s periodic sentence promises remains unrealized. The very last word of the sentence, “everlastingly,” tries to save the anticlimax with its
ponderous polysyllables lifting the sputtering sentence into a high-flown sermon. But its claim for eternity is immediately canceled by the next sentence: “This I see for a second.” At first “now” seems durational, but the vision of perpetual pattern unravels as the sentence proceeds to its terminus. If we read the novel spatially, we would fail to note this whole temporal process of a special moment coming into being and almost immediately fading away within a single sentence.

**Syntax of Possibility: Narrative Time v. Sentence Time**

While *The Waves* subtly registers the failure to perpetuate the present through grammar and syntax, Woolf’s earlier works foreground the temporality of her sentences even more by putting them in tension with narrative. Before I come back to *The Waves*, I will look at some of these instances to characterize the kind of temporality that her sentences aspire toward but fail to realize. I will focus on moments in *Mrs. Dalloway* where Woolf’s sentences strain to extricate themselves from narrative and gesture toward an eternal figurative time in which what is impossible in the narrative setting becomes possible. My close readings will show that while the syntactic rendition of such moments seems affirmative at first, the very fact that they quickly disappear as the story resumes intensifies their transience.

As we have seen in the introduction, scholars have focused on narrative as the major rhetorical device by which modernists represented time. As a result, they have downplayed the temporality of individual sentences when they display stylistic excess that has little to do with the narrative. One instance of this critical assumption is Paul Ricoeur’s narratological reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Ricoeur argues that, although the characters’ inner monologues slow down the forward momentum of the novel in *Mrs. Dalloway*, they “make the narrated time advance by delaying it, they hollow out from within the instant of the event in thought, they amplify from
within the moments of narrated time, so that the total interval of the narrative, despite its relative brevity, seems rich with an implied immensity” (Time and Narrative 103-4). Any detours into the consciousness of a character augment this overall effect waiting for the reader at the end of the story, “the total interval of the narrative . . . rich with an implied immensity.” But the problem with Ricoeur’s teleological reading is that it bypasses moments in the novel where the internal monologue of a character does not contribute to this “intelligible whole.” In such moments, Woolf’s narrator resists the teleological momentum of narrative by driving her sentences beyond narrative time.

In Ricoeur’s account of the novel, Woolf’s narrator yields to the teleological movement of narrative, merely serving as a recorder of the characters’ inner monologues to amplify the intelligible whole of the story: “The narrator—to whom the reader readily grants the exorbitant privilege of knowing the thoughts of all the characters from the inside—is provided with the ability to move from one stream of consciousness to another” (104). One of Ricoeur’s examples is when the narrator moves from Peter to Rezia by describing the song of a female beggar: “A sound interrupted [Peter]; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into ee um fah um so/ foo swee too eem oo—” (80). This long passage triggers the transition from Peter’s consciousness to Rezia’s: “‘Poor old woman,’ said Rezia Warren Smith, waiting to cross. Oh poor old wretch!” (82).

My two examples from the novel question Ricoeur’s teleological reading by showing how Woolf leaves behind the consciousness of a character for a different kind of temporality that exists outside the story. In these passages, Woolf gestures toward the poetic or figurative time in which linear time is suspended—what is described in these moments has little to do with the
characters in the novel. In the following passage, the narrator enters Clarissa Dalloway’s mind by writing a sentence so complex and figurative as to have little to do with the consciousness she is supposed to describe:

Millicent Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. No vulgar jealousy could separate her from Richard. But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl. (30)

The passage starts out by giving a psychological portrait of Clarissa (“she feared time itself”) and contrasting her present state with her “youthful years” in favor of the latter. To describe the sensation the young Clarissa felt, it would suffice to say “an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging.” But “while” extends the sentence to the point of disengaging it from the narrative: “[w]hile the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface.” The sea can be read as a symbol of Time’s ebb and flow, but “the waves…gently split their surface” takes the harm out of it, blunting the earlier sharp-edged images of time (“a dial cut in impassive stone,” “her share was sliced”) as if to mitigate Clarissa’s fear of time.
But the latter half of this long sentence has little to do with the character or the narrative per se: it is not necessary for the story to keep going. Here the teleological momentum of narrative is subdued to the figurative time that deflects the force of linear time. Of course, such figurative rejuvenation never takes place on the plot level: the last sentence of the passage is meant to underscore the fact that Mrs. Dalloway is no longer capable of “stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years.” But Woolf’s syntactic and figurative excess makes us forget the initial negation (“how little”), giving birth to the timeless beauty of “pearl” at the end of the sentence as if to annul the passage of time, although it is not warranted by the narrative.

Woolf’s sentence drives the novel beyond the narrative to a more abstract temporal plane, where something impossible within the narrative is proposed as a possibility. We can find her early interest in this imaginative realm in “A Woman’s College from Outside”:

Yes, as if the laughter (for she dozed now) floated out much like mist and attached itself by soft elastic shreds to plants and bushes, so that the garden was vaporous and clouded. And then, swept by the wind, the bushes would bow themselves and the white vapour blow off across the world.

From all the rooms where women slept this vapour issued, attaching itself to shrubs, like mist, and then blew freely out into the open. Elderly women slept, who would on waking immediately clasp the ivory rod of office. Now smooth and colourless, reposing deeply, they lay surrounded, lay supported, by the bodies of youth recumbent or grouped at the window; pouring forth into the garden this bubbling laughter, this irresponsible laughter: this laughter of mind and body floating away rules, hours, discipline: immensely fertilising, yet formless, chaotic, trailing and straying and tufting the rose-bushes with shreds of vapour. (147)
“As if” turns the laughter into vapor, but in the second paragraph, the vapor becomes real, pervading the dormitory rooms of a woman’s college: “From all the rooms where women slept this vapour issued.” The narrator blurs the boundary between the imaginative and real, toning down the demand of the world that limits the freedom of women (“this irresponsible laughter . . . floating away rules, hours, discipline”). Although this imagined possibility is “immensely fertilising, yet formless, chaotic,” it exists outside the reach of the characters embedded in the forward momentum of narrative. “A Woman’s College from Outside” entertains the possibility of freedom for women but ends with Angela’s confrontation with the reality inhospitable to them:

Sucking her thumb like a child (her age nineteen last November), she lay in this good world, this new world, this world at the end of the tunnel, until a desire to see it or forestall it drove her, tossing her blankets, to guide herself to the window, and there, looking out upon the garden, where the mist lay, all the windows open, one fiery-bluish, something murmuring in the distance, the world of course, and the morning coming, 'Oh,' she cried, as if in pain. (147-48)

Angela’s final cry suggests that the world remains the same despite the figurative language that constructs the dreamscape of possibility.

In the same way, the mere radicalization of syntax and figures does not rejuvenate Mrs. Dalloway; the exquisite suspense her younger self used to feel is still outside her reach. The following passage about Rezia is another case in point:

“For you should see the Milan gardens,” she said aloud. But to whom?

There was nobody. Her words faded. So a rocket fades. Its sparks, having graded their way into the night, surrender to it, dark descends, pours over the outlines of houses
and towers; bleak hillsides soften and fall in. But though they are gone, the night is full of them; robbed of colour, blank of windows, they exist more ponderously, give out what the frank daylight fails to transmit—the trouble and suspense of things conglomerated there in the darkness; huddled together in the darkness; reft of the relief which dawn brings when, washing the walls white and grey, spotting each windowpane, lifting the mist from the fields, showing the red-brown cows peacefully grazing, all is once more decked out to the eye; exists again. I am alone; I am alone! She cried, by the fountain in Regent’s Park…. (23-24)

Like the Dalloway passage, this passage starts out as the description of Rezia’s psychological isolation, but quickly leaves it behind, for the imagery that permeates it is more than what her emotion requires. “Her words faded. So a rocket fades” suggests an analogical relationship between the two sentences, and the next sentence extends the figure to compare Rezia’s loneliness to a bleak landscape spattered with darkness (“dark descends, pours over the outlines of houses and towers”). Although “reft of the relief” describes Rezia’s psychological deprivation, “relief” is detailed in such a long, complex sentence that the word wrenches itself from its syntactic subservience to “reft”: “reft of the relief which dawn brings when, washing the walls white and grey, spotting each windowpane, lifting the mist from the fields, showing the red-brown cows peacefully grazing, all is once more decked out to the eye; exists again.” The relative clause that modifies “relief” gets longer and longer to the point of nullifying the negating force of “reft.” By the end of the sentence, we arrive at this peaceful landscape free from any sense of deprivation. It suggests that the relief can be recovered (“once more…; exists again”), although this possibility is not within Rezia’s reach, being offered as a general statement that refers outside the narrative (“all is once more decked out to the eye; exists again.”). But the next
sentence tolls us back from this generic landscape to the particularized narrative context in which Rezia is imprisoned: “I am alone; I am alone! She cried, by the fountain in Regent’s Park.” The moment the possibility is conjectured, it is withdrawn from the character. Now the narrative resumes as if there had been no digression into the world of possibility.

**Figurative Time: Temporality of Poetry**

In the two examples from *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s sentences create the temporal plane that has little to do with the actual story. This figurative excess seems affirmative at first, for in each instance, the past tense of the story is abstracted into the eternal present (“exists again”). This is the condition of timelessness that Woolf scholars have ascribed to the entirety of *The Waves*. But when we locate it in Woolf’s sentences, we can see how the narrative past of fiction is no place for such digressions into figurative time. The story must go on, and this transition from the figurative to the narrative creates a jarring effect that underscores the characters’ entrapment in their actual lives.

The problem is that of genre. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Edgar Allan Poe argues that there can never be a long poem because intensity cannot be sustained for such a long time. Hence a long poem is a contradiction in terms, Poe suggests, because it is “merely a succession of brief ones — that is to say, of brief poetical effects” (15). By definition, a poem “is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief” (15). *The Waves* is a response to this artistic problem, as Woolf dispenses with narrative and writes in figurative language throughout. But such intense language cannot be maintained for the duration of the novel. It fades even over the course of a single sentence, as in Louis’s periodic sentence.
Woolf wrote several essays about this tension between prose and poetry and the possibility of incorporating poetic language into fiction. In her 1926 essay “Impassioned Prose,” Woolf argues that today’s novelists are so preoccupied with fact that they are unable to “modulate beautifully off into rhapsodies about Time and Death” (Collected Essays 166), ignoring “all that side of the mind which is exposed in solitude.” She praises Thomas De Quincey for being able to manage this stylistic gearshift, but also points out the problem of what she calls “the horrid transition” from the intensely poetic to the ordinary. After digressing into rhetorical rhapsodies, for example, De Quincey “must descend from these happy heights to the levels of ordinary existence” (168).

This problem of fusing poetry with prose preoccupies Woolf for the next few years during which she planned and wrote The Waves. In her 1927 review of E. M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel, Woolf challenges Forster’s assumption of what fiction should do—mimesis, realism—by aligning herself with poets, who share her concern with language: “In poetry, in drama, words may excite and stimulate and deepen; but in fiction they must, first and foremost, hold themselves at the service of the teapot and a pug dog, and to be found wanting is to be found lacking” (462).

Rather than recording every detail of daily life, Woolf wants fiction to be stripped down to the essential, charged with the kind of concentrated intensity Poe associates with poetry. In her diary entry from November 28th 1928, she writes:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes…. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don’t belong to the moment, this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner:
it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated? (139)

Here she is trying to overcome De Quincey’s limitation, to avoid making “the horrid transition” from the poetic to the mundane by eliminating the latter. In a sense, this is what Woolf sets out to do in The Waves by dispensing with narrative and writing in highly figurative language. Ideally, fiction selects certain details from daily life that can be crystalized into a symbol, a concentrated image that stands for a bigger picture, as she says in her 1929 essay “Phases of Fiction”: “The novel, it is agreed, can follow life; it can amass details. But can it also select? Can it symbolize? Can it give us an epitome as well as an inventory?” (102)

But such linguistic and temporal concentration does not materialize in The Waves. In Mrs. Dalloway, the swerve from the narrative to the poetic, then back to the narrative, creates a jarring transition, leaving the afterimage of a withdrawn possibility and underscoring its absence. The Waves emphasizes this horrid transition by contrasting the tempo of the interludes with that of the soliloquies. For example, in the first italicized passage, “as if” and other simile words introduce figurative language, but the transition from that to the next sentence is not abrupt because the figures quickly become part of reality:

Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow, spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire
were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woolen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue (7).

The third “as if” introduces “the arm of a woman,” but in the next sentence her figurative status changes from simile to metaphor, “Then she raised her lamp higher,” becoming part of the landscape as a matter of course. In the same sentence, “seemed” introduces “fibrous,” and “like” introduces “the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire,” and both of these similes become metaphors in the next sentence, as if the fire is real: “Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze.” There is no “horrid transition” here: what is introduced as a figure of speech in one sentence turns quickly into part of reality in the next sentence.

This is not the case for the soliloquies. Over and over, poetic language breaks down under the weight of daily life, just as the sentences in Mrs. Dalloway gesture toward the world of possibility only to return to the story as if that figurative possibility has never existed. For example, when Louis compares himself to a plant, he cannot sustain his metaphor as the pressure of reality increases:

I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. (11-12)

As Louis extends his organic metaphor, reality presses down on him, and he quickly admits that he is “a boy in grey flannels.” In the same way, when Rhoda fancies herself to be a Russian empress, the façade of poetic language collapses, exposing her daily self:
Now I will go to the bathroom and take off shoes and wash; but as I wash, as I bend my head down over the basin, I will let the Russian Empress’s veil flow about my shoulders. The diamonds of the Imperial crown blaze on my forehead. I hear the roar of the hostile mob as I step out on to the balcony. Now I dry my hands, vigorously, so that Miss, whose name I forget, cannot suspect that I am waving my fist at an infuriated mob. ‘I am your Empress, people.’ My attitude is one of defiance. I am fearless. I conquer. (56)

The dream is first introduced with “will” (“I will let the Russian Empress’s veil flow about my shoulders.”) but is quickly actualized in the present tense (“I hear the roar”) as if Rhoda’s rhetorical dream has come true. But a verbal leitmotif in the soliloquies, “now,” ushers in her real self to cut her fancy short: “Now I dry my hands, vigorously, so that Miss, whose name I forget, cannot suspect that I am waving my fist at an infuriated mob.” The fall from the royal language is jarring. Despite her defiant tone (“I am fearless. I conquer”), Rhoda admits in the next sentence, “But this is a thin dream. This is a papery tree. Miss Lambert blows it down…. It is not solid; it gives me no satisfaction—this Empress dream” (56).

Poetic language figures prominently in the novel because it can construct an alternative reality that lifts the burden of daily life. Through poetic language, Woolf’s characters manage to will themselves out of their daily selves and into what they are not, be it a tree or an empress. For them this is liberating, as Neville comments on Bernard’s habit of comparison: “Bernard is a dangling wire, loose, but seductive. Yes, for when he talks, when he makes his foolish comparisons, a lightness comes over one. One floats, too, as if one were that bubble; one is freed; I have escaped, one feels” (38). But when we read the novel sentence by sentence, we can see how this poetic intensity fades, giving way to the narrative setting in which the characters are embedded.
The Sense of An Ending

In *The Waves* the depletion of poetic time coincides with the end of the novel. This is where narrative triumphs completely: however Woolf’s sentences aspire toward the condition of the eternal and figurative present, creating a different tempo resistant to narrative, the story must end. The final sentence of some of Woolf’s major novels enacts her awareness of an extraordinary, special moment fading as soon as it comes into being. At the end of *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Lily Briscoe finally finishes her painting and utters the novel’s final line, “I have had my vision” (209). The present perfect is ambiguous: while it could be striking a triumphant note, suggesting that Lily has finally achieved her artistic vision, it could also mean that it has already vanished. At the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sense of an ending is more unambiguous. Peter Walsh is filled with an extraordinary feeling at Clarissa’s party, but the intensity of this moment is diminished when the narrator gets the final say:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was.

(296)

The narrator qualifies Peter’s affirmation of Clarissa’s presence (“It is Clarissa”) by repeating it with the difference of tense (“For there she was”), embalming her in the narrative past. In the penultimate sentence she exists in the present; in the final sentence she is already posthumous.
Toward the close of The Waves, the sense of an ending is also in the air, and more prominently so than her previous novels. In this final italicized section, the story is near the end. The sun has set, the landscape darkening:

As if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on, covering houses, hills, trees, as waves of water wash round the sides of some sunken ship. Darkness washed down streets eddying round single figures, engulfing them; blotting out couples clasped under the showery darkness of elm trees in full summer foliage. Darkness rolled its waves along grassy rides and over the wrinkled skin of the turf, enveloping the solitary thorn tree and the empty snail shells at its foot. Mounting higher, darkness blew along the bare upland slopes, and met the fretted and abraded pinnacles of the mountain where the snow lodges for ever on the hard rock even when the valleys are full of running streams and yellow vine leaves, and girls, sitting on verandahs, look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans. Them, too, darkness covered. (237)

There is no human figure in this landscape. In the first italicized section, the “as if” clause introduces a human image into the otherwise impersonal seascape: “The sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp…” (7). But here in the final italicized section, the imaginative possibility of the “as if” is depleted, for it merely repeats what is to be described in the main clause: “As if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on… as waves of water wash round the sides of some sunken ship.” In other words, “as if” does not transport the sentence to a figurative realm where the impossible is entertained as possible. Instead, “darkness” dominates both the “as if” clause and the main clause, as well as the rest of the passage: “darkness moved on,”
“Darkness washed down,” “Darkness rolled its waves,” “darkness blew along the bare upland slopes,” “darkness covered.”

It is in this context of the depersonalized and imaginatively depleted landscape that the sentence arrives at the seemingly eternal present that many readers of The Waves have singled out as the dominant temporality of the novel. The “where” clause in the penultimate sentence gets longer and longer to the point of freeing itself from monotonous repetition of “darkness”: “the fretted and abraded pinnacles of the mountain where the snow lodges for ever on the hard rock even when the valleys are full of running streams and yellow vine leaves, and girls, sitting on verandahs, look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans.” As in the two sentences from Mrs. Dalloway, the subordinate clauses starting with “where” has little to do with the bleak landscape described in the main clause. “Snow” rinses away the omnipresent darkness, and the passive and damaged landscape (“fretted and abraded”) yields to the active and volitional nature in the eternal present (“the snow lodges for ever,” “the valleys are full of running streams”). In this suspended, seemingly timeless moment, the landscape is humanized and hospitable to human figures (“girls, sitting on verandahs, look up at the snow”).

The final italicized section could have ended here, but Woolf insists on the mortality of this special, seemingly timeless moment as she moves from the penultimate sentence to the last. The “girls,” introduced by the “where” clause of the penultimate sentence, become part of the real landscape in the final sentence, only to be drowned by darkness: “girls, sitting on verandahs, look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans. Them, too, darkness covered.” As in the ending of Mrs. Dalloway, the present tense of an extraordinary moment disappears into the narrative past. Moreover, the difference in tempo of the two sentences mirrors the flagging intensity of the special “now.” The penultimate sentence reads fast because it is propelled by its
light-footed meter (*look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans*). But this long sentence gives way to a short sentence that is rhythmically different: it is so heavily stressed and punctuated that the tempo of the passage slows down (*Them, too, darkness covered*). As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this rhythmic shift highlights the “horrid transition” from the eternal figurative present to the narrative past. While the penultimate sentence introduces human figures into the continuous natural time, the final sentence negates this possibility of temporal unity by drowning them in darkness.

Woolf repeats the pattern of calling up a seemingly timeless moment and draining its intensity at the very end of the novel, the final soliloquy section, where Bernard imagines himself as a young knight jousting against death. In this final moment, the kind of figurative rejuvenation that Mrs. Dalloway experiences takes place. The eternal present toward which Woolf’s sentences aspire seems to have materialized, as Bernard meditates on “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again”:

> And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement. It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!'  
>
> *The waves broke on the shore.*

(297)
Just like Rhoda, who imagines herself as a Russian Empress, Bernard turns into a young man through poetic language, defying the actual progression of time. Moreover, the apostrophe “O Death” defies the narrative closure, for this poetic device, as Jonathan Culler has argued, “resists narrative because its now is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a now of discourse, of writing” (152). The temporality of the apostrophe is the now of speaking and reading: we are asked to imagine Bernard addressing Death at this very moment.

But the final apostrophe is remembering a particular poem, and the contrast between the two reinforces the incompatibility of poetic time with narrative time. In a passage from Dante’s *Inferno* Canto 26 ll. (94-102), the homebound Ulysses voices his yearning for knowledge. Woolf copied this passage into the opposite page of a diary entry from December 22, 1930, where she sketches out a preliminary idea about how to end the novel: “I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard’s final speech, & end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all those scenes & having no further break” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* Vol. III 339). But the Dante passage might have been refracted by a more immediate literary memory, Tennyson’s “Ulysses.” The poem is about defiance against old age, just as Bernard’s final soliloquy is:

3 Woolf wrote down the following lines
né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
del vecchio padre, né ’l debito amore
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore
ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto,
e de li vizi umani e del valore;
ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto
sol con un legno e con quella compagna
picciola da la qual non fui diserto.
(neither the sweetness of a son, nor compassion for my old father, nor the love owed to Penelope, which should have made her glad, could conquer within me the ardor that I had to gain experience of the world and of human vices and worth; but I put out on the deep, open sea alone, with one ship and with that little company by which I had not been deserted.)
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

(ll. 65-70)

Ulysses’ final words, “not to yield,” echo in Bernard’s battle cry, “unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” But the major difference between the two is that the novel ends by returning to the narrative past (“The waves broke on the shore.”), as the apostrophic “O” is entombed in the echo chamber of “broke.” This final verb is unambiguously in the past, as opposed to the end of To the Lighthouse: “I have had my vision.” Here Woolf writes with an end in view, letting the death of an extraordinary, intense moment coincide with the death of the story. It is this self-consciousness of time passing that pervades Woolf’s sentences.

As we have seen, many readers of The Waves have misrepresented the temporality of the novel, arguing that it aspires toward a spatial, timeless condition. One way of avoiding such misreading is by closely examining the way Woolf’s sentences unfold in time. The sentence is temporal as it moves from one word to the next until it eventually terminates, and Woolf enhances this temporal nature of the sentence in her fiction. The consideration of Woolf’s sentence-time complicates not only the spatial reading of The Waves but also the widespread assumption that modernists represent the present as affirmative or future-oriented, as a locus of possibility. We have seen how Kern subscribes to this view, and how it has misled DuPlessis into reading The Waves under the sign of Stein’s “beginning again and again.”
*The Waves* does not share this futuristic spirit. Rather, it repeatedly enacts the passing away of moments through the temporal unfolding of the sentence, as if Woolf is always conscious of the intensity of the present leaking from the seams of her syntax. Indeed, Paul de Man suggests that this dilemma of representing the present in language is a hallmark of literary modernity. Citing Baudelaire’s phrase “représentation du present,” de Man points out that it “combines a repetitive with an instantaneous pattern without apparent awareness of the incompatibility” (156) because any representation of the present lacks its instantaneity. Woolf’s syntactic tempo captures this dilemma of representation, which is further amplified by her emphasis on the temporal difference between poetry and fiction. When her sentences leave the narrative setting and enter the seemingly eternal present, this present is always colored by the awareness of its imminent death. Time cannot be redeemed, and even the brief moment of triumph over time has to come to an end. Woolf’s syntax dramatizes this self-consciousness of the ever-fading present and the impossibility of aesthetic transcendence.
Chapter 2: Dehumanization and the Death of Poetic Language in Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood

In his introduction to the 1936 American edition of Nightwood, T. S. Eliot warns readers of Djuna Barnes’s difficult prose: “A prose that is altogether alive demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give. To say that Nightwood will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it” (xii). Barnes’s prose, Eliot continues, “has the prose rhythm that is prose style, and the musical pattern which is not that of verse. This prose rhythm . . . is what raises the matter to be communicated, to the first intensity” (xii).

But most readers of Nightwood have hedged the problem of Barnes’s style. They often mention it in passing and then move on to a different issue. For example, after praising Barnes’s poetic style, Eliot devotes most of his essay to emphasizing the overall structure of the novel. He argues that the novel is “not simply a collection of individual portraits; the characters are all knotted together, as people are in real life, by what we may call chance or destiny, rather than by deliberate choice of each other’s company: it is the whole pattern that they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest” (xv). What Eliot calls “deeper design” of destiny was further elaborated by Joseph Frank in his seminal essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945). Frank argues that even when Nightwood seems fragmentary in style and narrative, it will cohere in “a pattern arising from the spatial interweaving of images and phrases independently of any time-sequence of narrative action” (52).¹

More recent scholars have focused on Barnes’s style, but they tend to interpret “style” as a thematic term and pay little attention to its verbal texture. For example, Monika Kaup places Barnes’s prose in the baroque tradition, characterizing it as “an ornate, circular, obscure, rambling, hyperbolic style, a style which is non-communicative and transgressive, and which is the major source of the anti-realism of Barnes’s work” (85). But Kaup rarely analyzes Barnes’s language in detail, only referring to it as a “rhetorical abundance” (104). Similarly, Andrew Goldstone starts his discussion of *Nightwood* by acknowledging, “The most prominent feature of Barnes’s writing is not her expatriate themes but her startling prose style” (113). But in his account of “style,” Goldstone does not talk about Barnes’s language, only her representation of the cosmopolitan “lifestyle.”

In this chapter, I will focus on Barnes’s prose style and the negative temporality that it dramatizes. Barnes’s prose is notoriously difficult, but its difficulty has too frequently been brushed aside in critical readings of *Nightwood*. I argue that her obscure poetic style contributes to the sense of temporal diminution that pervades the novel. *Nightwood* has an air of finality: humans are no longer fully fleshed-out characters, and language no longer an efficacious means of communication or a way to redeem the fractured present as was the case for Woolf.

My argument is in two parts. First, I will examine Barnes’s narrative syntax to explore how the unfolding of her obscure, difficult sentences diminishes the presence of human characters, often by drowning them in the thick web of language and overshadowing them in the grand scheme of historical time. Eliot touches on the novel’s theme of dehumanization in his introduction: “Sometimes in a phrase the characters spring to life so suddenly that one is taken aback, as if one had touched a wax-work figure and discovered that it was a live policeman” (xiv). But such animating moments are rare. Rather, *Nightwood* presents characters as less than
human, often associating them with animals. Robin is “a woman who is beast turning human” (37). Guido, her child, is described as “staring at paintings and wax reproductions of saints, watching the priests with the quickening of the breath of those in whom concentration must take the place of participation, as in the scar of a wounded animal will be seen the shudder of its recovery” (108). The theme of dehumanization receives the most troubling expression in the novel’s final scene, where Robin goes down on all fours and joins a dog: “Then she began to bark also, crawling after him--barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her” (170). This regressive temporality, as we will see, is registered by Barnes’s syntactic tempo.

Second, I will further argue that this pessimistic attitude is also reflected by Barnes’s attitude toward poetic language in general. In Woolf, poetic language provides, however momentarily, a way out of narrative into the figurative present where the passage of time may be reversed. When Barnes’s language becomes densely poetic, it does not have the same sense of liberation from narrative that Woolf’s does. Rather, it entrenches characters even deeper in the pastness of the narrative setting, reducing their status as humans over the course of the sentence.

The first critic to note the novel’s negative representation of human life and connect it to the issue of style was F. R. Leavis. In The Great Tradition, published three years after Frank’s essay, Leavis begins with this provocation: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad” (1). Leavis’s selection is not purely based on the technical mastery of these novelists, but on the idea that “they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life” (2). This life-affirming sentiment is the main tenet of Leavis’s “great tradition.” It is for this reason that, among writers after
Conrad, Leavis includes D. H. Lawrence in his canon while snubbing Joyce:

It is this spirit, by virtue of which [Lawrence] can truly say that what he writes must be written from the depth of his religious experience, that makes him, in my opinion, so much more significant in relation to the past and future, so much more truly creative as a technical inventor, an innovator, a master of language, than James Joyce. I know that Mr. T. S. Eliot has found in Joyce’s work something that recommends Joyce to him as positively religious in tendency…. But it seems plain to me that there is no organic principle determining, informing, and controlling into a vital whole, the elaborate analogical structure, the extraordinary variety of technical devices, the attempts at an exhaustive rendering of consciousness, for which *Ulysses* is remarkable, and which got it accepted by a cosmopolitan literary world as a new start. It is rather, I think, a dead end, or at least a pointer to disintegration—a view strengthened by Joyce’s own development … (25-26)

Leavis pits Joyce’s stylistic propensity toward “disintegration,” which culminates in *Finnegans Wake*, against Lawrence’s life-affirming, moral earnestness. In “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” Eliot praises Joyce’s way of overlaying the present with myth, “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). Leavis’s language invokes Eliot’s only to note the absence of such order in the novel: “there is no organic principle determining, informing, and controlling into a vital whole” (25).

“Vital”: for Leavis, what is at stake is not just prose style but also one’s attitude toward human life. Among writers under the influence of Eliot and Joyce, Leavis detects “the wrong kind of reaction against liberal idealism” (26), singling out Barnes’s *Nightwood* along with the
work of Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell’s *The Black Book*: “In these writers—at any rate in the last two (and the first seems to me insignificant)—the spirit of what we are offered affects me as being essentially a desire, in Laurentian phrase, to ‘do dirt’ on life.” Against this life-negating attitude, Leavis opposes the work of Lawrence, who once wrote in a letter: “One must speak for life and growth, amid all this mass of destruction and disintegration” (qtd. in Leavis 26).

Although Leavis links formal disintegration to anti-humanist values in *Nightwood*, later scholars have read this pessimistic novel as a story of social empowerment. In her influential essay, Jane Marcus argues that by focusing on marginalized groups of people such as Jews and homosexuals, the novel uncovers the presence of “the authoritarian dominators of Europe in the thirties, the sexual and political fascists” (144). Barnes’s portrayal of the oppressed, Marcus claims, is a way of resisting such authoritative figures, “a kind of feminist anarchist call for freedom from fascism” (144). Hence, *Nightwood* is “a book of communal resistances of underworld outsiders to domination,” and represents “a modernism of marginality” (147). Bonnie Kime Scott also reads *Nightwood* in this positive light, claiming, “Barnes breaks with binary tradition by calling attention to impositions of culture, including its rules of gender, upon nature” (73). Similarly, Victoria L. Smith argues that the silence of the racially and sexually marginalized inspires Barnes to look for a new linguistic possibility, and that through this linguistic performance, she “converts loss into gain” (203). Smith’s language suggests a kind of redemptive narrative, as she argues that such performances of losses are, “paradoxically, recuperations of those losses” (195).

While Leavis rightly considers the novel’s difficult style as symptomatic of its life-negating attitude, these later scholars discuss the novel as more affirmative than it actually is, and have little to say about its style. One reason for this neglect might be that Barnes’s rhetorical
excess has no place in the kind of positive narrative that they impose on *Nightwood*. I follow Leavis’s lead in exploring the intersection between Barnes’s obscure style and life-negating attitude that governs the novel. Barnes herself strikes this disturbing note when she writes to her mother in 1923, “Having life is the greatest horror”: “I cannot think of it as a ‘merry, gay & joyous thing, just to be alive’ – it seems to me monstrous, obscene & still with the most obscene trick at the end” (qtd. in Parson 168). Barnes expresses this sentiment more subtly through her prose style. It is not merely poetic or obscure: it embodies the negative temporal sensibility that pervades the novel through its excessive hypotaxis, figurative language, and repetition.

**Barnes’s Hypotaxis**

Barnes’s prose is notorious for its rhetorical density. Eliot notes: “I do not mean that Miss Barnes’s style is ‘poetic prose.’ But I do mean that most contemporary novels are not really ‘written’” (xii). Vincent Sherry has recently explored this “writtenness” of *Nightwood*. He reads Barnes’s prose in the line of Decadence, which is characterized, in Linda Dowling’s words, by “linguistic self-consciousness” (127), the awareness that words are written on the printed page rather than spoken in a human voice. Sherry locates this self-consciousness in the figure of the garrulous Matthew O’Connor, describing him as “[a] book talking as though it were human” (281). While many scholars have read him as a character, Sherry reads him as a human husk, a language gone awry: “He is in the end an automaton of language, inhabiting that status in the manifest absence of meaningful communication with reciprocating human individuals” (284). I want to extend Sherry’s observation to Barnes’s narrative voice. Even before O’Connor takes over the narrative by his manic ranting halfway through the novel, Barnes’s prose reveals the same “writtenness” through her hypotactic sentences.
Through this writtenness, Barnes’s sentences often move from narrative to a larger historical time that diminishes the individuality of a character. Narrative manages how time flows in a story, and in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we have seen how narrative time is suspended and gives way to local moments of the special present by way of describing a character’s interiority and memory. But in *Nightwood* characters are not lifelike or realistic; accordingly, Barnes’s syntax foregrounds its own artificiality. In the passage where Robin is first introduced, Barnes’s artificial syntax coincides with a thick description of material excess, which diminishes the presence of a human character:

> On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten—left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives—half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled. (34)

The kernel of the sentence is “On a bed . . . lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled,” but a welter of intervening phrases dilates this structure to a breaking point. The very “confusion” that surrounds the bed is enacted by Barnes’s obscure syntax. There is a faint chirping from somewhere in “the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten.” The oddity here is that despite their invisibility, the sentence dwells on them, detailing them to the point of distracting the sentence from Robin to her paraphernalia: “left without the unusual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives.” By the time we get to the end of the sentence, Robin’s presence has been completely drowned by a dense description of opulent interiors.
Many of these hypotactic sentences suspend the narrative, transposing the novel to a different historical time that downplays the individuality of its main characters. The very opening sentence of the novel exemplifies this dehumanizing tendency:

Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein—a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valence stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms—gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, seven days after her physician predicted that she would be taken. (1)

This one-sentence performance obfuscates the subject-predicate relationship under a thick web of prepositional phrases, appositions, and subordinate clauses. We can parse the sentence to get the gist of it, but the very experience of reading this complex sentence word by word is disorienting. It does not produce the kind of structural coherence that Eliot finds when he notes “the prose rhythm that is prose style, and the musical pattern which is not that of verse” (xii).

In addition to creating such linguistic confusion, the sentence makes characters less lifelike by directing our attention from the main story line to a different time period. “Early in 1880” gestures to a particular time in history in which the story is taking place, but soon the sentence gets sidetracked from 1880 to a more general, historical stereotype, to the anti-Semitic “well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race.” “That race” implicates us in this understanding, as if to suggest that we should know which race is being referred to. After this slippage from a specific historical time to a more abstract time, we are introduced to
the novel’s first character, “Hedvig Volkbein.” But we never see her in action: not only is she lying on bed, the main verb (“gave birth”) is postponed to the very end of this long sentence. The intervening phrases describe not this human agent but the furniture that surrounds her: “lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valence stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin.” Each piece of furniture is given a dense description that overshadows the grammatical subject. Moreover, the presence of history (“the House of Hapsburg,” “an envelop of satin on which . . . stood the Volkbein arms”) further diminishes the inactive subject lying on bed.

The tempo of the sentence also belittles Hedvig’s death. When this long sentence finally comes to an end, it feels anticlimactic because its syntax turns out to be disproportionately simple: “Hedvig Volkbein . . . gave birth . . . to an only child . . . seven days after her physician predicted that she would be taken.” This bare-bone version reveals how the tempo quickens after “seven days” since there is no phrase to interrupt it. After detouring into the minute description of historical past and the furniture, the sentence resumes the narrative and quickly wraps it up. The final phrase, “she would be taken,” is a let-down, especially because, after it has been delayed for so long, all of a sudden we go from a long periodic sentence to this colloquial idiom (instead of “she would not survive,” for example).

Barnes’s long sentences do not always focus on the time of narration, but subordinate it to the time of history that overshadows it. When this happens, characters become less individuated—not unique characters who inhabit a particular point in time, but playthings of History. In the second sentence, Hedvig gives birth to Felix and dies. From there the novel goes back in time, introducing her husband Guido and recounting how he first met Hedvig. Again, Barnes’s hypotaxis interferes with this human drama by constantly derailing the sentence from
its grammatical destination and presenting Guido as a puppet manipulated by a historical force larger than himself:

Then walking in the Prater he had been seen carrying in a conspicuously clenched fist the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen that cried aloud of the ordinance of 1468, issued by one Pietro Barbo, demanding that, with a rope about its neck, Guido’s race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace, while ladies of noble birth, sitting upon spines too refined for rest, arose from their seats, and, with the red-gowned cardinals and the Monsignori, applauded with that cold yet hysterical abandon of a people that is at once unjust and happy, the very Pope himself shaken down from his hold on heaven with the laughter of a man who forgoes his angels that he may recapture the beast. (2)

Repeatedly, as we read this sentence, our attention is diverted from person to thing. The focus of the sentence shifts from Guido walking in the Prater to “the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen.” Then, the linen is further elaborated in a subordinate clause whose main verb animates the handkerchief as a symbol of Christians’ prosecution of Jews: “the exquisite handkerchief of yellow and black linen that cried aloud of the ordinance of 1468, issued by one Pietro Barbo, demanding that, with a rope about its neck, Guido’s race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace.” It is not Guido that is filled with this historical memory but the object he carries. Just as in the opening scene, the focus of the attention is what surrounds the character, not the character himself. As soon as the sentence announces Guido as its grammatical subject, it moves on to the handkerchief that is saturated with a historical side story involving multiple characters (e.g. “ladies of noble birth,” “Pope”) who seem more alive and present than Guido.
Moreover, a change of tense in this passage underscores the effect of dehumanization that the first pages of the novel have set in motion. The first sentence, “Then walking in the Prater he had been seen,” makes us conscious of Guido’s posthumous status. His death has already been announced in the opening paragraph of the novel: “[Hedvig] named him Felix, thrust him from her, and died. The child’s father had gone six months previously, a victim of fever” (1). Then the next sentence quickly revives him, though in the crypt of the pluperfect: “In life he had done everything to span the impossible gap; the saddest and most futile gesture of all had been his pretense to a barony. He had adopted the sign of the cross” (3). From here until the narrator replaces Guido with Felix, his son, as the center of her attention, main events are narrated in the pluperfect. The odd repetition of “had” is increasingly noticeable in supposedly lively scenes like the following, where Guido and Hedvig dance: “When she had danced, a little heady with wine, the dance floor had become a tactical maneuver; her heels had come down staccato and trained” (4). The scene is meant to convey an action, but the repetition of the pluperfect keeps reminding us that the characters involved are pronounced dead at the very beginning of the novel.

Barnes’s temporality here is the opposite of Woolf’s. As I have argued in my previous chapter, when Woolf suspends narrative, it is to enter a special, figurative temporality in which the past tense gives way to the continuous present tense, as if she wanted to keep an intensely felt moment from passing away. On the contrary, Barnes does not struggle to perpetuate the present, to sustain what Eliot has called “first intensity,” but dwells in its secondariness, its pastness. This is another form that dehumanization takes in Nightwood: both characters and the narrative time that they inhabit can be easily swallowed into a larger, historical time. The twists and turns of Barnes’s long sentences enact this temporal slippage from narrative to history.

**Simile and Stereotype**
The reduction of human characters to historical types is also enacted by her figurative language. Barnes’s language is often labeled as “poetic.” In a 1934 letter to Emily Coleman, Barnes says that she “can’t get the book accepted anywhere” (qtd. in Plumb x) and complains about the publishers:

... they all say that it is not a novel; that there is no continuity of life in it, only high spots and poetry—that I do not give anyone an idea what the persons wore, ate or how they opened and closed doors, how they earned a living or how they took off their shoes and put on their hats. God knows I don’t. (x-xi)

T. S. Eliot echoes this characterization in his introduction to Nightwood in more positive terms. He writes that Barnes’s prose is so “alive” that it requires the kind of effort that only readers of poetry are ready to give. Frank repeats this judgment in his seminal essay by arguing that the novel is far more coherent than it appears—it is structured by juxtaposition like a modern poem: “Since the unit of meaning in Nightwood is usually a phrase or sequence of phrases—at most a long paragraph—it carries the evolution of spatial form in the novel forward to a point where it is practically indistinguishable from modern poetry” (52-53).

But this simple equation between Barnes’s language and poetry is misleading, because Nightwood dramatizes the tension between the pastness of narrative and the present tense of poetic language. Barnes’s language is as figurative as Woolf’s, but the temporality each author promotes is radically different. In Woolf, similes often function as a way out of narrative time,

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2 Frank took a cue from Eliot’s preface to pursue this comparison between Barnes’s prose and poetry, as he recounts much later: “[‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’] originated in my fascination with Djuna Barnes's Nightwood, which I read shortly after its publication in 1937. The book haunted me for some reason, and I began trying to define for myself the difference between it and more conventional novels.... I was struck by T. S. Eliot's comparison in the preface between the prose of the novel and poetry, which led me to see if I could pin down this observation more concretely.” See Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), xii.
creating a space in which characters are freed from narrative constraints. In the following
passage, which I have quoted in my previous chapter, Mrs. Dalloway remembers the time when
she was young. As the sentence gets longer and longer, however, we leave this narrative setting
behind and enter an extended simile in which time seems to have been reversed:

… she filled the room she entered, felt often as she stood hesitating one moment on the
threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before
plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten
to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn
over the weeds with pearl. (30)

This long sentence takes us from a recollection of her youth (“she filled the room she entered”) to
the figurative present by way of a simile (“such as might stay a diver”). In this figurative
space, the aged Mrs. Dalloway disappears, and the memory of her youth is perpetuated by the
figure of an incorruptible pearl.

Barnes’s figurative language has the opposite effect. Like Woolf’s, Barnes’s similes transpose us from the narrative past to the present tense, but her figurative present depersonalizes the object of comparison. In many instances, as the sentence compares a character to something else, it extricates the character from the particular narrative time and de-individuates and transposes him or her to general time. This subjective diminution is exemplified by the “Guido” passage I have quoted earlier:

… while ladies of noble birth . . . applauded with that cold yet hysterical abandon of a people that is at once unjust and happy, the very Pope himself shaken down from his hold on heaven with the laughter of a man who forgoes his angels that he may recapture the beast. (2)
In each instance, a subordinate clause takes us out of the narrative past to the present tense by comparing the tenor to a general type (“a people,” “a man”). Here I will give more examples to show its pervasiveness:

… Felix now saw the doctor, partially hidden by the screen beside the bed, make the movements common to the “dumbfounder,” or man of magic; the gestures of one who, in preparing the audience for a miracle, must pretend that there is nothing to hide…. (35)

With a tension in his stomach, such as one suffers when watching an acrobat leaving the virtuosity of his safety in a mad unraveling whirl into probable death, Felix watched the hand descend…. (36)

She chuckled, now and again at a joke, but it was the amused grim chuckle of a person who looks up to discover that they have coincided with the needs of nature in a bird…. (53)

Jenny, with the burning interest of a person who is led to believe herself a part of the harmony of a concert to which she is listening, appropriating in some measure its identity, emitted short exclamatory ejaculations. (71)

Each of these comparative clauses generalizes a character into a type either through “one” or “a person.” Each simile appeals to our common sense, as if we know someone similar to the character in our lives, rather than presenting us with a full-blood, lifelike character particular to Barnes’s fictional world.
When Barnes’s sentence goes from the past tense to the present tense by way of a subordinate clause or prepositional phrase, we are not invited to sympathize with the object of comparison as an individuated character. Rather, the character’s individuality diminishes over the course of the sentence’s unfolding as Barnes’s similes reduce them to the most generic “one” or “person.” Sarah Allison identifies this syntactic move from narrative past to present tense in the work of George Eliot, noting an effect that is entirely different from Barnes’s. In what Allison calls the “commentative clause,” a sentence “shifts from the narrative past tense to a universalizing present by means of the relative pronoun which” (1275). One of her examples is the first sentence of *Middlemarch*: “Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress.” She argues that this syntactic construction is representative of the “mid-nineteenth-century style” in which “[p]resent-tense statements generalize fictional particulars, often in order to make a direct appeal to readerly sympathy; long modifying clauses elaborate on fictional particulars, signaling a realist mode of detailed, critical observation.”

In *Nightwood* this move from narrative time to general time, from character to type, explains the prominence of racial and national stereotypes. We have already seen how Guido is haunted by Jewish history, by what the narrator describes as “racial memories” (2). The note of racial stereotype is sounded over and over throughout the novel, because it constitutes the essence of each character. Guido’s son, Felix, is “racially incapable of abandon” (38). Hedvig represents the Viennese, as suggested in Barnes’s signature comparative clause: “Hedvig had played the waltzes of her time with the masterly stroke of a man, in the tempo of her blood, rapid and rising—that quick mannerliness of touch associated with the playing of the Viennese, who, though pricked with the love of rhythm, execute its demands in the dueling manner” (5). In other
words, there is a temporality that is larger than narrative time or a character’s individual time. It is the ghost of history, of the higher temporal perspective that overshadows individual characters.

This historical ghost manifests itself in the motif of atavism that runs through Barnes’s similes. Barnes’s similes do not just generalize but reduce humans to animals or non-human elements. The relationship between language and atavism becomes quite evident when Robin passes through a series of comparative “as” and “as if” clauses, each grinding her to mere soil:

Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water—as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations—the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado. (34-35)

Three similes in this short passage keep Robin within the register of inorganic material rather than likening her to a more positive image (e.g. from Mrs. Dalloway to “diver/ pearl”). Compared with the way Woolf’s simile creates a figurative world in which time can be redeemed, however momentarily, Barnes’s has no liberating force. Her “as if”s repeatedly emphasize the material status of a human body that is no different from other organisms.

This regressive temporality is registered by the way Barnes’s sentences go from character to type or thing, as we have seen in many instances of her similes. Another way to put this is that her language conspires with the impulse toward death rather than resisting it. For example, in another sentence that ends with “as” and “as if,” Nora, so obsessed with Robin, dreams about her and is reduced to inorganic material over the course of the sentence:
… and crying out, Nora would wake from sleep, going back through the tide of dreams into which her anxiety had thrown her, taking the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse, with minute persistence, down into the earth, leaving a pattern of it on the grass, as if they stitched as they descended. (56)

Just like the generic “person” or “one,” Nora’s anxiety is compared to the ground “things.” There is also something tautological about the “as” clause, reinforcing the sense of physical and psychological entrapment: “taking the body of Robin down with her into it” in the main clause is repeated by “the ground things take the corpse, with minute persistence, down into the earth” in the subordinate clause, as if there is no way to compare this downward movement except to itself. The only difference is that the human characters are replaced by “things” and the “corpse.” The similes are depopulated and depleted of any salvation—no human actor inhabits them. The only role of figurative language here is to reinforce the narrative situation in which characters are trapped and to dehumanize them over the course of the sentence. The end of the sentence, in other words, coincides with the end of life or any life-affirming attitude.

Both Woolf and Barnes are known for their “poetic” prose, but Barnes’s language has little in common with the way the figurative present is used to particularize in typical lyric poetry. In Theory of the Lyric, Culler singles out the present tense as the most prominent characteristic of Anglo-American poetry, where “lyrics use a special nonprogressive present with verbs of action to incorporate events while reducing their fictional narrative character and increasing their ritualistic feel” (287). For example, one rarely says, “I walk,” unless it is meant to be habitual (e.g. I walk every morning). In poetry, however, it can describe a one-time action unique to the speaker, as in the opening line of Yeats’s “Among School Children”: “I walk through the long school room, questioning.” Here we are asked to imagine Yeats’s speaker
performing the action he enunciates in this particular moment of speaking. This understanding of poetic language as an individuating device is echoed by Eliot, who criticizes the dehumanizing force of public language and clichés in the voice of Eeldrop: "The majority not only have no language to express anything save generalized man; they are for the most part unaware of themselves as anything but generalized men” ("Eeldrop and Appleplex” 104).

In contrast, Barnes’s similes compare characters to types and locate them in a general historical time rather than individuating their actions in a particular narrative time. Although Barnes’s prose has been described as “poetic,” poetic language has no real power in Nightwood to enter the eternal, figurative present that we have seen in Woolf’s work.

**Metaphor and the Death of Poetic Language**

In Woolf, poetic language is a way of opening up a special figurative temporality that gestures, however momentarily, toward the possibility of being freed from narrative confines, of imagining a better present and future that is not available for her characters. In contrast, Barnes uses poetic language not to call up this alternative temporality, but she does so without much faith in its redemptive power. Language is too enervated to do this, and the odd rhetorical abundance of Barnes’s style is an attempt to fill in the void, a sign of her language’s own insufficiency. It signifies the temporal deadlock or stagnation in which her characters are trapped, unable to break into a special figurative present.

The depletion of poetic language, of its ability to imagine an alternative temporality, culminates in the figure of Matthew O’Connor, who dominates the latter part of the novel by his never-ending monologue. Unlike the narrative use of simile, his speech depends on a chain of metaphors. “Metaphor,” Denis Donoghue claims, “expresses one’s desire to be free, and to replace the given world by an imagined world of one’s devising” (86). But O’Connor’s
metaphors have no such power to construct an alternative world. Just as Barnes’s similes tend to be stereotypical and not quite individuated, O’Connor’s metaphors fizzle out quickly, unable to sustain themselves. That is, the tempo of his speech is fast-paced, moving from one figure to the next, and this frantic rapid speech is a sign that his language cannot sustain the durational figurative present we have seen in Woolf’s extended similes.

While Barnes’s narrator often uses similes, O’Connor thrives on a sputter of fast-dying comparisons. This contrast further foregrounds the status of poetic language in the novel: it no longer signifies heightened moments in which what is not possible within the narrative is made possible. Words are without substance, and the only function is to make nice music. The difference in tempo between the narrative voice and O’Connor’s speeches highlights the confused, broken nature of his poetic language. This difference is evident in the scene where a word in the narrative is picked up by O’Connor: “Felix, as disquieted as if he were expected to ‘do something’ to avert a catastrophe (as one is expected to do something about an overturned tumbler, the contents of which is about to drip over the edge of the table and into a lady’s lap), on the phrase ‘time crawling’ broke into uncontrollable laughter” (18). On the next page, O’Connor takes up the word “tumbler” from the extended simile and turns it into part of a series of metaphors. But his way of dealing with the word is more casual:

… I am no herbalist, I am no Rutebeuf, I have no panacea, I am not a mountebank—that is, I cannot or will not stand on my head. I’m no tumbler, neither a friar, nor yet a thirteenth-century Salome dancing arse up on a pair of Toledo blades—try to get any lovesick girl, male or female, to do that today! (19)
Here one metaphor gets replaced by another in a quick succession, as if O’Connor does not care whether he is making sense. His metaphors are often incoherent and confused. Here is his typical speech:

So, I say, what of the night, the terrible night? The darkness is the closet in which your lover roosts her heart, and that night-fowl that caws against her spirit and yours, dropping between you and her the awful estrangement of his bowels. The drip of your tears is implacable pulse. (89)

“Closet” and “roost” do not go together (“Closet” could have been a “cage” to go with the bird image). Mixed metaphors are common in O’Connor’s speech. He continues: “Night people do not bury their dead, but on the neck of you, their beloved and waking, sling the creature, husked of its gestures” (89). As in the previous example, “husked” is a mixed metaphor, as it turns the creature, which recalls Coleridge’s albatross slung around the killer’s neck, into a plant.

In Nightwood, poetic language becomes a mere tool for impressing the audience, and even for this purpose it proves ineffectual. For O’Connor, semantics are less important than surface glitter. The force of his language depends on vocal intensity rather than rhetorical coherence: “Once the doctor had his audience—and he got this audience by the simple device of pronouncing at the top of his voice (at such moments as irritable and possessive as a maddened woman’s) some of the more boggish and biting of the shorter early Saxon verbs—nothing could stop him” (15). But the doctor’s speech has no real power to captivate his audience: “Frau Mann was slightly tipsy, and the insistent hum of the doctor’s words was making her sleepy” (28).

Barnes further emphasizes this fallen status of poetic language by drawing an invidious comparison between O’Connor and Oscar Wilde. The difference is that while Wilde’s language is perfectly studied, chiseled to a symmetrical sentence, O’Connor’s imitation of it falls flat and
has no real rhetorical power on the audience. For example, when O’Connor says to Felix, “One’s life is peculiarly one’s own when one has invented it” (118), he recalls a famous paradox in Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist”: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (282). The difference is that O’Connor’s speech does not charm his audience. He is no Lord Henry, who corrupts Dorian Gray with his seductive witticisms (e.g. “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it”). In the following passage, Jenny, who is in love with Robin, sees her talking to another woman in a carriage and starts crying. O’Connor tries to carry on conversation with Jenny, perhaps to comfort her:

He remarked, and why he did not know, that by weeping she appeared like a single personality who, by multiplying her tears, brought herself into the position of one who is seen twenty times in twenty mirrors—still only one, but many times distressed. Jenny began to weep outright. (75)

“Personality” and “multiplying,” by their proximity, conjure Wilde’s attack on the idea of sincerity from The Picture of Dorian Gray and “The Critic as Artist,” respectively: “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (154); “What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (285). But O’Connor does not seem to own what he says (“He remarked, and why he did not know”) as if he were just trying to sound like Wilde.

The odd tempo of O’Connor’s sentence contributes to the suggestion of his rhetorical insufficiency. His mirror imagery feels even comic when a long elaboration of the figure (a single personality whose tears are multiplied by twenty mirrors), extended by two complex relative clauses (“who… who…”), finally gives way to a disproportionately simple sense: “—still only one, but many times distressed.” The gist of this hypotactic sentence—she looks
terribly sad—is explained in a mere sweep of final seven words. This elaborate figure is awkwardly phrased, too, with a clumsy repetition of “who” and “one” further contributing to the impression of O’Connor’s rhetorical insufficiency: “… a single personality who, by multiplying her tears, brought herself into the position of one who is seen twenty times in twenty mirrors—still only one, but many times distressed.” Finally, despite his attempt to comfort her, Jenny bursts into tears. The transition is emphasized by the fact that a very long hypotactic sentence quickly gives way to a short sentence—“Jenny began to weep outright”—that proves O’Connor’s rhetoric powerless.

O’Connor’s rhetorical insufficiency reinforces the characters’ entrapment in the pastness of narrative. Unlike Woolf’s, Barnes’s poetic language does not carry across, in the root sense of “metaphor,” from literal, narrative time to special, figurative time, which, in Woolf, meant a momentary liberation from the passage of time. Rather, Barnes’s language reinforces a feeling of linguistic stagnation and psychological entrapment. After Jenny bursts into tears, it turns out that her tears are faked and she has not been listening to O’Connor. She is only interested in her lover. Not only does this nullify O’Connor’s elaborate figure, the sentence that reports it further suggests that poetic language provides no way out of the reality in which characters are trapped:

As the initial soft weeping had not caught Robin’s attention, now Jenny used the increase and the catching in her throat to attract her, with the same insistent fury one feels when trying to attract a person in a crowded room. (75)

The narrator’s language here suggests the depletion of linguistic possibility, through an awkward repetition: Jenny cries louder “to attract her, with the same insistent fury one feels when trying to attract a person in a crowded room.” This comparative phrase does not transport the scene to a different register. Rather, it generalizes Jenny in a carriage as “a person in a crowded room,” just
as Barnes’s similes reduce characters to types. The awkward repetition of “attract” recalls the same clumsy rhetoric we have seen in the previous passage. It also gives the impression that we do not go anywhere other than where we started—the vehicle and tenor are circling the same set of words rather than going from one register to another.

This sense of entrapment is at the heart of O’Connor’s non-stop talking. The transvestite doctor goes on talking, but words cannot give him what he wants. He remains confined in his gender:

I’ve given my destiny away by garrulity, like ninety per cent of everybody else—for, no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. (91)

His unfulfilled desire to be a woman incites a highly rhetorical language that goes from one figure to another in an instant. Such verbal profusion, however, cannot construct a reality in which his desire is fulfilled. Rather, his “garrulity” signifies a void that he tries to fill in with words. As Eliot’s Sweeney says, “I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you” (The Complete Poems 83), even with the knowledge that those words are already dead.  

Repetition: Barnes, Joyce, and Lawrence

The rhetorical figure in which Barnes’s temporal stagnation appears most clearly is repetition. Curiously enough, three modernist writers whom Leavis compares in the passage I quoted earlier are known for repetition as well as their unique poetic style. In Leavis’s estimation, Barnes’s use of poetic language is far from “vital,” and we have seen how generic and repetitive her figurative language can be. It effects linguistic and psychological inertia. The

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3 The verbal profusion of O’Connor’s speeches is also reminiscent of Eliot’s “Gerontion,” especially in terms of tempo. See my discussion of the poem in Chapter 4.
style that is most emblematic of this attitude toward language is repetition. For example, in the following passage, Barnes further details Nora’s frustrated longing for Robin: “As an amputated hand cannot be disowned because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is its forebear, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce” (59). The relationship between the comparative clause and the main clause is tautological (“an amputated hand,” “amputation”). Compare this to the Woolf passage I have quoted earlier. Woolf likens Mrs. Dalloway to a diver, and then expands the figure with sea imagery, leaving behind the narrative setting that occasioned the simile. Barnes, however, reinforces the setting by repeating the same word in both clauses.

Repetition is symptomatic of the death of language and the temporal stagnation of *Nightwood*. There is no liberation from narrative time through figurative language. Repetition is Barnes’s way of locking the characters in the narrative, with no way to escape, because the vehicle and tenor are too close to each other to suggest any kind of progression. I will compare her to two other writers whom Leavis discusses—Joyce and Lawrence—in terms of repetition and the temporality that they promote. All three writers are known for their stylistic idiosyncrasy and use repetition for expressive means, but the temporality Barnes and Joyce promote is different from Lawrence’s. Sherry regards repetition as a defining feature of Decadence poetics, where poets like Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti find a new means of expression in the idea of afterward or secondariness—afterimage, echo, puppet—which is embodied in the actual rhythm of “repetition that fades” (71). By focusing on this stylistic device as a measuring rod, I will explore the link between style and temporal sensibility in Barnes, Joyce, and Lawrence to expand on the contrast Leavis makes. I argue that while the repetitive style of Barnes and Joyce suggests the inertia of language to work against narrative time and create a figurative present,
Lawrence’s repetitive style sustains an intensely perceived moment by prolonging a sentence through figurative language and repetition. Lawrence’s temporality, in other words, is more durational and affirms the present moment—it is far more “vital” than writers of Joycean affiliation.

In the case of Barnes and Joyce, repetition makes language seem automatic and devoid of the figurative language’s ability to liberate characters from narrative time. In this sense, Barnes is more pessimistic than Woolf, whose language can extricate characters from narrative and transpose them to an alternative temporality that redeems them from the ravages of time. The chapter from which I quoted Barnes’s tautological sentence explores Nora’s relationship with Robin. Its very last sentence exemplifies Barnes’s use of repetition and the temporal sensibility that it dramatizes. In the following passage, Nora dreams of witnessing Robin’s affair with another woman:

Unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees, so that her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition, but dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body. Her chin on the sill she knelt, thinking, “Now they will not hold together,” feeling that if she turned away from what Robin was doing, the design would break and melt back into Robin alone. She closed her eyes, and at that moment she knew an awful happiness. Robin, like something dormant, was protected, moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women; but as she closed her eyes, Nora said “Ah!” with the intolerable automatism of the last “Ah!” in a body struck at the moment of its final breath. (64)

Barnes’s signature comparative phrase (“with the intolerable automatism of…”) makes us expect that it will compare Nora to “one” or “person.” But the introduced phrase “Ah!” merely repeats
what is in the main clause, with the difference that the sentence is now moving toward the sense of finality (‘last ‘Ah!’” and “final breath”). The sentence, in other words, does not really compare; it is repetitious. The final simile reduces Nora to a body crying out by reflex, without will. Coinciding with the end of the chapter, the image of death reinforces the sense of an ending. This is symptomatic of the general tendency toward the negation of life that Leavis detected in *Nightwood*: there is no “awareness of the possibilities of life” (2). For Barnes, repetition means rhetorical stagnation, psychological entrapment, and a lack of progress except toward death.

Joyce’s use of repetition also takes the same approach toward temporality that we have seen in Barnes’s novel. Joyce suspends narrative, but his use of repetition is as circular as Barnes’s, for he makes his language autonomous and independent of human speakers. It leaves the world of narrative not for alternative temporality but in favor of linguistic play, creating a world in which characters are shown to be constructed from words. This is the same subjective diminution that we have seen in Barnes’s puppet-like characters. The “Siren” chapter of *Ulysses* is a case in point. As Derek Attridge points out, this chapter challenges the unity of self by displacing a personal pronoun with “lips” as the grammatical subject. For example: “In the second carriage, Miss Douce’s wet lips said, laughing in the sun” (l. 72). Here, as Attridge argues, “Miss Douce’s wet lips” usurp “Miss Douce” from the privilege of the speaking agent (“Joyce’s Lipspeech” 60). His other examples include “Her wet lips tittered,” “Lenehan’s lips over the counter lisped a low whistle of decoy,” and “Down she sat. All ousted looked. Lips laughing.” In all these examples, Joyce refers to lips as if they speak instead of the character, as if “[an organ] has its own physical properties and patterns of behavior which displace and subvert the central, commanding, conscious will…” (64). These syntactic dislocations are symptomatic of the autonomy of words that permeates “Sirens,” as Attridge says:
… every item of speech or writing has its own sound and shape, independent of its authorized function in the language system, and this material specificity and independence prohibit transparency, fixity, and singleness of meaning; words, even letters, have lives of their own in *Ulysses* (and even more so, of course, in *Finnegans Wake*). In “Sirens,” these two processes come together: bodily displacements and substitutions are enacted in the displacements and substitutions of language. (64).

The representation of a character’s voice in “Sirens” questions the unity of self from which words are supposed to originate. Just as lips speak instead of the speaking agent, words make noise outside the control of an organizing consciousness. The very status of “character” is now in question: their subjectivity is compromised because they do not have full control over the words they speak, subsumed under the autonomous process of language.

Joyce’s repetition entrenches his characters further into this linguistically constructed world, hence reducing their status as human characters. It is another form of the linguistic entrapment we have seen in Barnes’s repetition. The next passage from “Siren” is a good example: “Miss Kennedy sauntered sadly from bright light, twining a loose hair behind an ear. Sauntering sadly, gold no more, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear” (ll. 81-83). From the narrative point of view, the first sentence is enough; the next two sentences retell the same action in different rhythms and syntactic shapes. The last two sentences increasingly indulge in what Brad Bucknell calls “a kind of aural excess which goes beyond the simple requirements of visual description” (134). For example, the second sentence sacrifices precision for sound play by introducing “twisted,” a synonym of “twined,” but retains both words, probably for alliteration and another set of iambs. The third sentence is equally imprecise. “She twined in sauntering gold hair” is confusing because
“sauntering” can be read as an adjective for “gold hair” or a participle going with “in.” The addition of “curving” is redundant since the ear is usually curved. The last sentence is not even consistent with the second sentence: first, Miss Kennedy is “[g]old no more,” but in the next sentence, she has “gold hair.” It is as though words float like atoms and bond with one another with no regard to meaning.

In a more extreme instance of Joyce’s repetitive style, there is not even a variation. It is purely redundant: “Grossbooted draymen rolled barrels dullthudding out of Prince’s stores and bumped them up on the brewery float. On the brewery float bumped dullthudding barrels rolled by grossbooted draymen out of Prince’s stores” (7. 21-24). Both sentences use exactly the same words: no addition is allowed except what grammar demands (“by”). The second sentence rearranges the same words as the first with no change except syntactic order. Such linguistic redundancy is not harnessed to any effect other than linguistic play. Compare this again to Woolf’s work, where the excess of her figurative language expresses her desire for the eternal figurative present. The stylistic excess of Joyce’s repetition is purposeless just as a child’s play is purposeless. It is not directed toward any life-affirming attitude but rather reduces his characters to linguistic constructs.

Lawrence’s repetition differs from that of Barnes and Joyce because repetition does not mean redundancy or inertia. Lawrence’s repetition refuses to be secondary to what Eliot calls “first intensity.” It staves off the end of a sentence so that the special moment that it enacts seems to last a little longer. As a special moment is sustained, the sentence that renders it gets longer and longer, and even when it stops, the next sentence reenacts it, reversing the flow of linear time. In Women in Love, a seemingly ordinary love scene between Ursula and Rupert Birkin becomes transcendental as language gets repeated over and over:
She closed her hands over the full, rounded body of his loins, as he stooped over her, she
seemed to touch the quick of the mystery of darkness that was bodily him. She seemed to
faint beneath, and he seemed to faint, stooping over her. It was a perfect passing away for
both of them, and at the same time the most intolerable accession into being, the
marvellous fullness of immediate gratification, overwhelming, outflooding from the
Source of the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest, strangest life-source of the human
body, at the back and base of the loins. (315)

The movement of this passage is incremental. It starts with seemingly inert repetition: “She
seemed to faint beneath, and she seemed to faint.” But as the language becomes more and more
religious (“the most intolerable accession into being”), it lifts sex into a state of spiritual ecstasy,
reversing the Christian hierarchy of body and soul. The sentence becomes less normative, piling
up phrase after phrase in apposition, so the narrative past loses its pastness through a series of
tenseless participles and noun phrases: “the marvellous fullness of immediate gratification,
overwhelming, outflooding from the Source of the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest,
strangest life-source of the human body, at the back and base of the loins.” A chain of
superlatives (“the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest, strangest”) suggests sexual climax as
well as the intensity of life-force generated by sexual activity.

But the ecstatic moment does not end here. Reaching the end implies that the rest is a
falling-off. Instead, in the next sentence Lawrence repeats some of the words from the previous
sentence, as if to prolong the same moment of ecstasy:

After a lapse of stillness, after the rivers of strange dark fluid richness had passed over
her, flooding, carrying away her mind and flooding down her spine and down her knees,
past her feet, a strange flood, sweeping away everything and leaving her an essential new being, she was left quite free, she was free in complete ease, her complete self. (315)

At first, the repetition of “after” and the past perfect “had passed” insist that the moment of sexual and spiritual ecstasy is gone. But a series of present participles linger on the memory of the fluid life force running over her, “flooding, carrying away her mind and flooding down her spine and down her knees, past her feet.” This subordinate clause is further extended with “a strange flood,” which reprises the earlier phrase “the rivers of strange dark fluid richness” as if to start the clause all over. It is a second take, a second climax, which is even more intense than the first as “rivers” turn into a “flood.” It is prolonged with another set of present participles: “a strange flood, sweeping away everything and leaving her an essential new being.” As the sentence comes near the end, there is a final attempt to dilate this moment through repetition: “she was left quite free, she was free in complete ease, her complete self.” Each clause has a different emphasis. “She was left quite free” is passive, but “she was free in complete ease, her complete self” gives her more agency and self-sufficiency.

Lawrence’s repetition proposes a temporality completely different from Barnes’s. It tries to sustain a special, intense moment. Nor does it push the sentence toward the suggestion of death or atavism as Barnes’s does. It affirms an intensely felt moment, a special now, by making it more durational than it otherwise seems. It enacts temporal redemption, as the narrator of The Rainbow exclaims, “Away from time, always outside of time!” (187) Lawrence’s repetition mirrors this temporal aspiration toward a spatialized, timeless condition by prolonging the moment as much as possible.

The basic structure of Lawrence’s sentences is paratactic. It extends the moment by adding phrase after phrase rather than reaching the grammatical termination. Stephen Freedman
makes a useful distinction between completeness and wholeness in sentence-making. While completeness suggests the “logical order” (32) in which we can perceive a clear beginning and closure, wholeness suggests the organic construction of the sentence, where the sentence proceeds “by a continual sidewise displacement . . . dependent upon the fraternal bonds of a theoretically endless proliferation of familial resemblances rather than the dynastic bonds of filiation” (33). Lawrence’s sentence is of the latter kind in that it refuses to reach an end by repeating words and introducing appositive phrases. Accordingly, the sentence is not propelled toward a certain destination or closure, but gives the impression that it is infinitely extendable.

Lawrence uses this very syntactic structure—additive, paratactic, repetitive—to sustain a special visionary moment. The following passage from The Rainbow confirms Lawrence’s aspiration to break out of the ordinary into the visionary and prolong his vision. In this passage, Anna and Tom Bragwen go to Lincoln Cathedral. Overwhelmed by the rich interiors, Tom experiences a spiritual ecstasy:

> Here the stone leapt up from the plain of earth, leapt up in a manifold, clustered desire each time, up, away from the horizontal earth, through twilight and dusk and the whole range of desire, through the swerving, the declination, ah, to the ecstasy, the touch, to the meeting and the consummation, the meeting, the claps, the close embrace, the neutrality, the perfect, swooning consummation, the timeless ecstasy. There his soul remained, at the apex of the arch, clinched in the timeless ecstasy, consummated. (187-88)

An ineffable moment of ecstasy, induced by the religious setting, prolongs itself with additive structure, with repeated words extending the sentence: “the stone *leapt up* from the plain of earth, *leapt up* in a manifold, clustered desire each time, *up*, away from the horizontal earth, *through* twilight and dusk and the whole range of desire, *through* the swerving.” The intensity of
ecstasy manifests itself through a series of appositive phrases as if the narrator is trying to sustain the moment: “through the swerving, the declination, ah, to the ecstasy, the touch, to the meeting and the consummation, the meeting, the claps, the close embrace, the neutrality, the perfect swooning consummation, the timeless ecstasy.” But the sentence does not stop here. “Consummation” suggests completion and no further development. Instead, this image of consummation is spatialized and stays still, as “his soul . . . remains clinched in the timeless ecstasy, consummated.” Moreover, “consummated” is ambiguous: it can be a verb in the past tense, “his soul consummated,” which suggests finality. But it can also be a past participle, describing a perpetual state of being consummated. Once it is consummated, it “remains” consummated.

Again, this moment of consummation is not really the end of Lawrence’s vision. As in the passage from Women in Love, in the next sentence he gives this ecstatic moment a second chance, recapturing its first intensity through repetition:

And there was no time nor life nor death, but only this, this timeless consummation, where the thrust from earth met the thrust from earth and the arch was locked on the keystone of ecstasy. This was all, this was everything. Till he came to himself in the world below. Then again he gathered himself together, in transit, every jet of him strained and leaped, leaped clear into the darkness above, to the fecundity and the unique mystery, to the touch, the clasp, the consummation, the climax of eternity, the apex of the arch.

(188)

The first word “And” announces that this paragraph continues the same ecstatic moment from the previous paragraph. Both paragraphs use the same lexicon, but a new word here is “this” (“but only this, this timeless consummation,” “This was all, this was everything”). “This” locates
the moment of ecstasy in space. Although the spell is soon broken (“Till he came to himself in the world below”), there is a second take: “Then again he gathered himself together.” As his desire leaps upward, the sentence accordingly dispenses with the narrative past by piling up nominatives as if the moment of ecstasy will never expire: “every jet of him . . . leaped clear in to the darkness above, to the fecundity and the unique mystery, to the touch, the clasp, the consummation, the climax of eternity, the apex of the arch.” The final word is not “consummation,” which suggests completion. It is, paradoxically, “the climax of eternity,” the climax that never ends, which is spatialized forever in “the apex of the arch.”

While Barnes’s repetition signifies linguistic deadlock, a falling off from “first intensity,” Lawrence’s repetition makes an intensely felt moment linger by prolonging sentences. It gestures toward a better future because a special now continues into the next moment, into the next sentence, with no sign of decline. Just as a repetition is as intense as the original, what comes next is as good as the starting point, if not better. It is perhaps this forward-looking sensibility—the special moment that never fades, always renewing itself—that appealed to Leavis.

The affirmative sensibility that later scholars have read into Nightwood is much closer to Lawrence, and not in keeping with Barnes’s pessimistic attitude toward human life. Her characters are less than human, and her language conspires with this life-negating spirit. Her syntax, poetic figures and repetition all point to the presence of the anti-humanist value to which Leavis objects. Perhaps critics’ lack of serious attention to Barnes’s style stems in part from the fact that it is hard to enlist her obscure language in support of positive narratives of social empowerment. But, as I have shown in my previous discussion of Woolf’s work, the seed of death, of what Leavis calls “disintegration,” runs through modernist literature and takes its most extreme form in Nightwood.

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This is the other side of positive modernism: the modernist interest in capturing a special now, moments of being, coexists with the awareness that it will not last long, that it must fade as soon as it is perceived. While Woolf still holds hope for temporal redemption through poetic language, through going out of the narrative past into the perpetual figurative time, Barnes gives up on this possibility and revels in its aftermath. If Barnes’s language feels excessive or inert at times, it is because she uses it almost in resignation, as if stirring dead coal, knowing that it will never catch fire.
Chapter 3: “Passionate Syntax”: Yeats’s Temporal Form

In “A General Introduction for My Work” (1937), W. B. Yeats writes:

> It was a long time before I had made a language to my liking: I began to make it when I discovered some twenty years ago that I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza. Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language. (Essays 521-22)

Although syntax was central to Yeats’s poetics in his later years, it has not received much critical attention. Even when it does, Yeats’s “powerful and passionate syntax” is discussed along the line of Yeats’s own characterization—as a manifestation of his strong interiority, so strong that it can make “a language to [his] liking.”

According to this reading, Yeats’s convoluted syntax in his middle and later poetry points to the presence of a speaker whose intense feeling cannot be expressed in normative syntax. John Holloway argues that Yeats’s syntax is “always in the direction of speech in the sense of the poet’s own most personal voice and presence: of an engagement of his own subjectivity and energy as the continuing focus of the poems and everything in them” (91). Bernard O’Donoghue agrees, identifying in Yeats’s poetry “the force of feeling” that expresses itself through the distortion of syntax (171).

Such emphasis on Yeats’s intense subjectivity and imaginative power is pervasive in Yeats studies. J. Hillis Miller considers Yeats’s “desire for a transfiguration of the present world

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1 In a 1926 letter to Herbert Grierson, Yeats also writes: “The over childish or over pretty or feminine element in some good Wordsworth and in much poetry up to our date comes from the lack of natural momentum in the syntax. This momentum underlies almost every Elizabethan and Jacobean lyric and is far more important than simplicity of vocabulary.” See Yeats, The Major Works, edited by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 464-65.
and the present self” central to his poetry (68). Similarly, Denis Donoghue notes that in Yeats’s poetry “the sense of power is the most pervasive sense at work” (5). It is “the power of transformation: the poet can make himself anew, become his own God . . . by the imperative act of his imagination” (11-12). “We recognize his style,” Donoghue observes, “by its tone of command; often in its presence, we stand rebuked” (12).

One exception to this critical assumption is Joseph Adams’s 1984 book *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax*. In this most extensive study of Yeats’s syntax to date, Adams locates many places in Yeats’s poetry where syntactic ambiguities are “more or less irresolvable” (4), revealing not a unified consciousness but dispersed subjectivity. The subject, Adams argues, is “seen as a textual product or construct rather than a full centre of consciousness expressing itself through language” (1). In other words, the subject becomes “a mere result of language” (12).

I will follow Adams’s lead in interpreting Yeats’s syntax not as a sign of masterful subjectivity but as a site of tension. But while Adams’s approach is spatial in that he tabulates local syntactical ambiguities in Yeats’s work, I read Yeats’s syntax in time, with an eye to the way an individual sentence unfolds as we read a poem. I argue that unlike spatial patterns such as stanza forms and rhyme schemes, the temporal dynamics of the sentence’s unfolding can illuminate Yeats’s complex, often troubled negotiation with time. The topic of Yeats’s temporality has been recently explored by essays collected in *Yeats and Afterwords* (2014). In their introduction, Marjorie Howes and Joseph Valente argue that Yeats was part of the Irish Revival that “took up the Irish past not as a nostalgic lost origin, but as a reality that persisted, in suppressed or marginalized forms, in the ongoing Irish present and could, accordingly, provide a renovated cultural foundation on which to build the Irish future” (2). But Yeats’s temporality, they argue, was more complex in that he saw the present as characterized by “fatal belatedness”
(3), where such a cultural project is already a lost cause and can no longer hold any possibility for a better future.

This temporal logic of looking back and forward manifests itself in the internal working of Yeats’s sentences. I will analyze three poems—“The Fisherman,” “The Tower,” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”—where his speakers look back to the past in the hope of carrying it forward to the future as a possibility. From his early interest in Irish folklore to his later interest in the Ascendancy culture, Yeats always saw the past as a source for an alternative future. But the temporality of his Celtic Revival often comes with the awareness, as in “The Fisherman” and “The Tower,” that lost time cannot be fully redeemed. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” further historicizes this awareness by grounding the poem in the chaotic period during the Irish War of Independence. In these poems, Yeats’s convoluted syntax registers not so much the presence of magisterial subjectivity as his complex engagement with an ever-recalcitrant time.

By exploring Yeats’s temporality through the examination of his syntax, I am also responding to what Joseph Valente has called “the return of formalism” (269) in recent Yeats studies. As Valente notes, one problem with formalism is that it tends to reinforce the image of Yeats as the master-poet. For example, in her study of Yeats’s stanza forms, Helen Vendler analyzes Yeats’s artistic choices as if he made them based on a preconceived plan. In reading “The Irish Airman Foresees his Death,” where the object of this elegy, Major Robert Gregory, figures as the speaker, Vendler imagines the compositional narrative Yeats might have followed:

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How should Gregory speak? What would be a suitable rhythmic measure of a young man going off to war? Yeats takes up a four-beat march rhythm, one of steady advance.…. And what rhyme pattern will Gregory use? Yeats chooses the ‘perfect’ abab quatraine-rhyme . . . and accentuates the airman’s simplicity of voice by using strong, mostly monosyllabic end-words…. (6)

From this teleological account of his writing process, Yeats emerges as a poet who knows where he is going from the start. Reviewing Vendler’s book, Valente questions this critical assumption, arguing that Vendler’s approach demonstrates the difficulty of reconciling formalism and historicism:

In the historicist model, poetry registers the particular complex of material, social, and political forces under the distorting conditions those forces themselves impose upon the author; on Vendler’s account, Yeats’s poetry makes contact with those forces only through the aesthetic order effectively imposed on them by the sovereign consciousness of the master poet. (273-4)

Attention to syntax helps us bypass this critical limitation of formalism. Unlike spatial patterns of rhyme and meter, the dynamic unfolding of Yeats’s syntax sensitizes us to the presence of confusion or uncertainty hidden under the surface of his well-wrought poems.

In his book-length study of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Michael Wood argues that “the great temptation of formalism at its purest . . . is to make the redemptive act too final and too perfect, and a good deal of the art we care about doesn't redeem disorder at all but narrowly and bravely loses the fight” (93). While discussions of such formal devices as stanza form, rhyme, and meter tend to emphasize Yeats’s formal mastery, the consideration of syntax, which
is not central to the recent rise in the formalist studies of Yeats, allows us to see Yeats’s speakers as immersed in time rather than rising above it and imposing formal order.

“A Great Audience of the Unborn”: The Tense of “The Fisherman”

From the 1880s on, Yeats was invested in the revival of local Irish culture, especially through collecting folklore and stories rooted in the native land, editing *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888, and later founding the Abbey Theatre in 1904. But while Yeats idealized the Irish folk tradition, he did not posit an easy continuity between the past, present and future. Despite his early enthusiasm for the Celtic Revival movement, over the years Yeats became skeptical of the possibility of realizing the future in which the lost tradition is recovered. By reading his transitional poem “The Fisherman,” I will chart Yeats’s disillusionment and show how his syntax dramatizes the tension between the hope of sustaining such temporal continuity and the impossibility of doing so.

Yeats’s attitude toward the Celtic Revival became more skeptical during the first decade of the twentieth century. In his 1902 essay “The Celtic Element in Literature,” Yeats emphasizes the uniqueness of Celtic culture, claiming that “literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times,” and that among all nations, “the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature” (85). But this desire to restore the lost tradition in order to revivify the present becomes more complicated in his later years, as he becomes more and more disillusioned with the possibility of creating a new art through the old local material.

Yeats’s growing disillusionment with his revivalist temporality is registered by the syntax of his poem “The Fisherman.” Completed in June 1914, the poem has often been read as Yeats’s
ars poetica. It voices his disillusionment with the Dublin middle-class audience who failed to appreciate the genius of John Synge by rioting at a premier performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. Yeats drafted the first version in 1913. During the time of the poem’s composition, Sir Hugh Lane, the nephew of Lady Gregory, was under severe public criticism for his campaign to give his collection of French impressionist paintings to Dublin if the city would build a proper gallery to host them.

The finished version was written a year later, and during the intervening year, both the Abbey and Lane’s concerted effort to build the gallery seemed to have failed. In September 1913, the Dublin Corporation voted against the plan, and Yeats wrote a series of poems and published them as *Poems Written in Discouragement* the next month. They included, most notably, “September 1913,” where Yeats describes the middle class as materialistic philistines who “fumble in a greasy till.” In the meantime he spent the first winter at Stone Cottage with Ezra Pound and became more and more interested in the Noh theatre, which was traditionally designed for a select audience. In his 1916 essay, “Certain Noble Plays of Japan,” he would declare unapologetically: “I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way—an aristocratic form” (*Essays* 221).

Accordingly, in the poem the speaker turns from this real, unappreciative audience whom Yeats often called “the mob” to an ideal audience represented by the fisherman, a symbol of native Irish culture. The poem ends with, in Roy Foster words, “one of WBY’s most magnificently assertive signatures” (12): “Before I am old / I shall have written him one / Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn.”

But “The Fisherman” is more than a straightforward repudiation of the mass audience. Its complex syntax dramatizes the speaker’s dilemma of being caught between his revivalist hope
and the reality that is inhospitable to it. Indeed, although the final assertion to write for the ideal audience sounds conclusive, such complex process of arriving at this statement makes the poem’s closure more ambiguous. In the first stanza, the speaker tells us that he first conceived of the fisherman twelve months ago, and then in the second stanza, in one long sentence, he remembers that first moment. Within that single sentence, tense shifts quickly, from present to past, from past to present, and then back to past and to future perfect. This interplay between tense and syntax creates a temporal drama in which the speaker looks back on his past self in a struggle to revive the vision of the fisherman and project the possibility of realizing him onto the future.

A. Walton Litz argues that in the second stanza the fisherman is transformed into “a vision of a possible future” (138). But Litz’s characterization of the poem is more accurate for the earliest version of the poem Yeats wrote the previous year. In May 1913 Yeats wrote “subject for a poem” into his notebook:

Who is this by the edge of the stream
That walking in a good homespun coat
And carries [a] fishing [rod] in his hand
We singers have nothing of our own
All our hopes, our loves, our dreams
Are for the young for those whom
We sing in [?]to life. But [there] is one
That I can see always though he is not yet born
He walks by the edge of the stream
In a good homespun coat
And carries a fishing rod in his hand.

(The Wild Swans 431)

“Though he is not yet born” implies that although the fisherman is not born yet, he will be eventually. Yeats sounded this hopeful note more forcefully in the same month in a speech after a special Abbey performance, with the Lord Mayor in the audience: “I have no doubt that all we here in Ireland to-day are living more or less in the eyes of an unborn public, that we are more or less playing our part before an audience, not like this small audience, but a great audience of the unborn” (7). He went on to say: "The present generation was the one in which they saw Irishmen learning to love the arts for their own sake. It would be remembered as the generation in which the Irish people became a modern people" (7-8). In both the 1913 passage and the speech, the birth of an ideal audience who is appreciative of art seems imminent. As suggested by “I can see always though he is not yet born,” the audience does not exist yet but is always available to the imagination as a future vision soon to be realized. Imaginative time is continuous with real, historical time.

The sense of disillusionment with the real Dublin audience pervades the 1914 version. The opening line immediately qualifies the revivalist temporality of the earlier version:

Although I can see him still,

The freckled man who goes

To a grey place on a hill

In grey Connemara clothes

At dawn to cast his flies,

It's long since I began

To call up to the eyes
This wise and simple man.
All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped 'twould be
To write for my own race
And the reality…

(ll. 1-12)

“I can see always” is replaced by “Although I can see him still,” which suggests that the fisherman he started imagining a year earlier might not be as vivid as he used to be. Rather than the idealized world of the continuous present in the draft, “The Fisherman” inhabits what the speaker calls “the reality.” It is crowded with “[t]he living men that I hate”—those who scorn Yeats and the Abbey’s effort to create avant-garde art and to bring Lane’s collection of paintings to Ireland. Through his involvement with the Abbey Theatre, Yeats wanted to create “an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind” (Autobiography 170). As Marjorie Howes argues, “between 1899 and 1910, Yeats’s Irish theatre represented, in part, an effort to forge and simultaneously theorize about the nation as a collectivity” (Yeats’s Nation 67). For him, the theatre was “a potential means of mobilizing and ‘nationalizing’ the masses, something he recognized any successful nationalism in the age of mass politics must do” (67). The poem speaks to the difficulty of this project, written after the Playboy riot—which Yeats called “the one serious failure of our movement” (Explorations 229).

The paratactic rhythm of the first stanza amplifies this increasing pressure of the mass audience that resist being unified into what Howes calls a national “collectivity.” “The dead man that I loved” refers to John Synge, but his presence is quickly drowned by a list of a philistine audience:
The living men that I hate,
The dead man that I loved,
The craven man in his seat,
The insolent unreproved,
And no knave brought to book
Who has won a drunken cheer,
The witty man and his joke
Aimed at the commonest ear,
The clever man who cries
The catch-cries of the clown,
The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down.
(ll. 13-24)

Instead of describing the audience as a group, Yeats lists them in a paratactic sentence as discrete singualrs: “the craven man,” “the insolent,” “no knave,” “The witty man,” “The clever man.” There is no unity among them. In the face of this reality, art is powerless, and its defeat is rendered with an air of finality in a chiasmus: “The beating down of the wise / And great Art beaten down.”

The temporal drama of the poem is to move forward from this deadlock by abolishing the gap between the time in which the fisherman was originally conceived and the repugnant present from which the speaker narrates. In the second stanza of “The Fisherman,” the speaker looks back to the past and reenacts the moment of his imaginative conception as if it is happening in the present moment of narration:
Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
(ll. 25-34)

Moreover, although the second stanza repeats many images from the first stanza, the shift from “It’s long since” to “Maybe a twelve month since” immediately suggests that the speaker is now trying harder to recall the original vision.

The subordinate clause, beginning with “Maybe a twelvemonth since,” dominates the rest of the stanza, despite the fact that the past action it narrates grammatically depends on the present. The subordinate status of “since” is almost unnoticeable, because the main clause is not clearly stated. In other words, although the vision is remembered, it feels vivid as if it is happening in the present moment. The dactylic opening of the next line, “Suddenly,” reinforces the intensity of the vision. The same word opens two of Yeats’s famous visionary poems: “The Cold Heaven” (“Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven”) and “Leda and the Swan” (“A sudden blow”). In both poems, the sudden intensity of a visionary moment coincides with the beginning of a poem. Similarly, “Suddenly” in “The Fisherman” announces that this second
stanza is not a mere continuation of the first stanza, but a new beginning. The pastness of the “since” clause is further deemphasized by the fact that the slant rhyme of “since” and “audience” is drowned by the triple $a$ rhyme of “since I began … / Imagining a man,” which emphasizes the present intensity of the reenacted vision. As Helen Vendler points out, there is a metrical shift, too, from the “simple iambic predominance” of the first stanza (“It’s long since I began / To call up to the eyes / This wise and simple man”) to the more “rhythmically alive” second stanza in the description of the fisherman (190, 191), with a trochee (“Climbing”) and spondees (“down-turn,” “flies drop”).

The poem’s focus on reviving the original moment of the fisherman’s birth can also be seen in Yeats’s revisions. He made two important changes. First, in the draft of “The Fisherman” in the Cornell manuscript edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the second stanza begins: “In scorn of this audience / Suddenly I began” (141). The original opening of the second stanza puts more emphasis on the causal progression between the two stanzas: his rejection of the mass audience led him to imagine the fisherman. In the final version Yeats obscures this link by starting the stanza with “Maybe a twelve month since.” This change makes the second stanza not just a continuation of the first stanza, but a reprisal of what has been said in the first stanza, with more imaginative intensity. Second, in the draft version “Imagining a man” reads “Imagining this man” (141, my emphasis). The change from the demonstrative to the indefinite article suggests that the speaker is recalling his vision as if he is imagining the fisherman for the first time.

Accordingly, as the sentence becomes longer and longer, it extricates itself from the subordinate status of “since” as well as its pastness. After a series of tense-less present participles and noun phrases, the narrative past completely disappears:
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream—

Matthew Campbell comments on this passage: “There is a pointed simplicity and no little prosodic artfulness in the mimicry of the simple skills of the fisherman” (194). While meter is simple, however, syntax is not. By the time we get to the last line of this passage, the grammatical kernel of this clause, “I began,” is left so far behind that the fisherman seems to be freed from the past tense that opened the stanza. As Adams has argued, Yeats often subverts “the normal hierarchical structure of language” (57). In this passage, Yeats unmoors the sentence from “I began” by piling up phrase after phrase, until it drifts into the present tense.

Such grammatical confusion mirrors the intensity of the speaker’s reenacted vision.

Compare the loose and spontaneous syntax of the above passage with a well-prepositioned, neat syntax of the first stanza:

Although I can see him still,
The freckled man who goes
To a grey place on a hill
In grey Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies,
The second stanza repeats many of these images but in a more fragmentary sentence, as if the speaker is trying to grasp his vision for the first time, perceiving body parts first (“his sun-freckled face,” “cloth,” “the down-turn of his wrist”) before grasping the whole picture. This initial fragmentariness testifies to the intensity of the vision. Similarly, the opening lines of “Leda and the Swan” suggest the rawness of the vision in fragmentary syntax:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
(ll. 1-4)

The perception of the scene is taking place at the present moment of speaking: the speaker lists a swarm of local perceptions (“wings,” “thighs,” “dark webs,” “nape,” “bill”) before organizing them into the whole scene in a complete clause (“He holds her helpless breast upon his breast”).

But this idealistic recuperation of the original intensity is subject to the speaker’s awareness that he lives in a fallen present. While the vision of the fisherman in the 1913 version stays in the simple present of “always,” the vision starts to diminish toward the end of the final version. The speaker admits that the fisherman is “[a] man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream.” In the 1913 draft, the word “dream” meant the hope for a new audience: “All our hopes, our loves, our dreams / Are for the young.” In the final poem “dream” means “fictional.” “A man who does not exist” also recalls “though he is not yet born” in the 1913 draft. The difference is that here the fisherman exists only in the speaker’s imagination, but not in real, historical time.
This gap between imaginative time and real time becomes even starker when the sentence returns to the past tense at this point:

A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, ‘Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.’

(ll. 35-40)

Up to this point, the sentence has moved away from the narrative past and has been hovering in the present tense. Now it is suddenly pulled back to the narrative past as if the spell has been broken. The shift is made even more abrupt by “and cried.” The verb “cried” takes “I” as the grammatical subject, but this subject last appeared 11 lines earlier in “I began.” This distance makes us pause and wonder who is doing the crying. This jarring shift is also metrical. The poem is written in the fast-moving tempo of iambic trimeter. But this sudden return to the narrative past coincides with the first internal punctuation in the poem, the comma that follows “cried,” which arrests this metrical momentum. In Yeats’s terms, this abrupt alteration of rhythm may be read as the breaking of a trance, as he suggests in “Symbolism of Poetry”:

The purpose of rhythm is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. (Essay 159)
The “alluring monotony” of the poem’s trimeter creates a dreamscape in which the past vision of the fisherman is brought back into the present with the original intensity. This rhythm-induced trance is interrupted by the jolting syntactic punctuation of “and cried,” waking the speaker up to reality.

Or perhaps this strong pause at “cried” is meant to strike an emphatically defiant note against the imaginative diminution happening in the previous two lines. The speaker has admitted that the fisherman is imaginary, but by crying out his resolution to write for the fisherman, he tries to maintain his hope for realizing an ideal audience in the future. The final lines are made particularly assertive by the future perfect tense. While the simple future “will write” suggests the wish for writing such a poem, “shall have written” sounds more like a prophecy and takes the completion of the poem for granted.

Moreover, “Before I am old” makes another assertive gesture that is rather uncharacteristic of Yeats. In his early poetry Yeats often casts his speakers as prematurely old. The ending of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is a good example, also because its language anticipates the closing lines of “The Fisherman”: “Though I am old with wandering / Through hollow lands and hilly lands, / I will find out where she has gone / And kiss her lips and take her hands” (ll. 17-20). The speaker of “The Fisherman” does not claim that he is already old, despite the fact that in the earlier version the speaker already groups himself with the old: “We singers have nothing of our own / All our hopes, our loves, our dreams / Are for the young.” In the final version Yeats’s speaker presents himself as not yet old, perhaps to reserve for himself the imaginative power to compose a poem before he yields to the young. To cite Foster’s words again, it is indeed an “assertive gesture.”
But Yeats’s confident note is qualified by the very forcedness of syntax and the abrupt shift from the present tense to the past tense. No one can read the sentence with the ease that the coordinating conjunction “and cried” promises. This forced transition exposes the difficulty of reconciling imaginative time with real time, of locating the imaginary fisherman in the future. Even in the poem’s final lines, we hear an echo of uncertainty in “Maybe as cold as passionate as the dawn.” Moreover, “cried” recalls “the catch cries of the clown” in the first stanza, thus bringing the clamor of the mass audience back into a lyric space seemingly insulated from this “reality.”

In “The Fisherman” the speaker looks back to the previous year, escaping from the mass audience and retrieving the vision of an ideal audience. As the sentence gets longer and longer, however, the temporal dynamics of the poem become more and more complex. Discussing Yeats’s habit of extending a sentence with semicolons where a simple period would do, Michael Wood argues that Yeats “is trying to stave off an ending, even of sentences . . . as if every thought is tracked by another thought, a new qualification or additional sentence or instance” (121). “The Fisherman” does not do such qualification overtly, but the complex extension of a sentence calls the dream of a timeless vision into question.

Vision and Revision in “The Tower”

As we have seen, the formal disorder of Yeats’s syntax mirrors his ambivalence toward his own revivalist temporality. But scholars like Marjorie Perloff and Helen Vendler have portrayed Yeats as a master of poetic form to the point of obscuring this ambivalence.³ Their work emphasizes the poet’s ability to find the best form to convey a particular content. The critical assumption that underlies such formalist work is that the poet can easily impose a kind of

aesthetic order on his temporal experience. But as we have seen in “The Fisherman,” the syntactic rhythm of Yeats’s poetry troubles the calm surface of such aesthetic order by acknowledging Time’s intractability.

It is this issue of poetic authority over temporal experience I want to consider next with “The Tower” (1928). On the surface, “The Tower” pits the poet’s ever-growing imaginative power against his old age. In the opening lines, the speaker decries his aged body, asking, “What shall I do with this absurdity— / Oh heart, O troubled heart—this caricature, / Decrepit age that has been tied to me / As to a dog’s tail?” (ll. 1-4) But he quickly goes on to assert his imaginative fertility: “Never had I more / Excited, passionate, fantastical / Imagination” (ll. 4-6). In the third section of the poem, he writes his will and declares that young men, reminiscent of the fisherman, will inherit his poetic legacy and carry it onto the future. In other words, like “The Fisherman,” “The Tower” seems to foreground the speaker’s imaginative capacity to forge a continuity between the past, the present, and the future. But death troubles Yeats’s revivalist temporality. Speaking of Yeats’s Last Poems, Marjorie Howes argues that Yeats considered poetry not “as the means of transcending death” but as signifying “the absolute loss of death as the spur that provokes poetry” (“Yeats’s Graves” 217).

The issue here is a temporal continuum between the dying poet and his heirs, and whether he can forge it to ensure that his legacy will be carried into the future. His syntax confidently extends itself, sustaining this impression of continuity. I will analyze the final section, which takes the form of a will addressed to his future audience, written in the verse form of “The Fisherman,” trimeter, rhyming ababcdcd:

It is time that I wrote my will;
I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone; I declare
They shall inherit my pride […]
(ll. 121-27)

“I declare” is a classic instance of what J. L. Austin called “performative.” It does not merely anticipate the future as in “I predict” or “I think”—“They shall inherit my pride” would suffice for that purpose. Rather, “I declare” determines the future as an official decree does. It calls attention to the poet’s empowered speech act and his ability to dictate the future. This confidence in poetic authority over time, however, diminishes in the course of this final section, as Yeats’s speaker becomes more and more conscious of his approaching death.

But before discussing Yeats’s syntax as a way of registering his growing self-doubt over temporal continuity, I will analyze the drafts of “The Tower” to show how Yeats comes to question the easy continuity between the past, the present, and the future. Just as the unfolding of a sentence mirrors Yeats’s increasingly troubled negotiation with time, his revision process repeatedly qualifies the kind of poetic authority that “I declare” grants the poet over the future. In other words, revision is another form of retrospective gaze, a second take, an opportunity for qualification after the initial intensity. A brief look at Yeats’s revision will help us understand the complex temporality that his syntax dramatizes.

One thing that Yeats did during the revision process was to minimize the continuity between the speaker of “The Tower” and his past self. While many readers have noted the echo of “The Fisherman” in the third section of “The Tower,” Yeats struggled to decide how much of
it should be heard. “The Fisherman” is more present in the drafts of “The Tower” than in the finished poem. The fisherman appears in early drafts as the speaker’s poetic double who will be an ideal audience and heir. Later drafts replace him with “young upstanding men,” hence weakening this poetic lineage. The earliest extant draft alludes to “The Fisherman” more directly, perhaps to create the speaker’s exact double, the sole heir to his poetic legacy:

And choose a sun flecked man for an heir
That can climb up a cold mountain
I choose a tall young man for an heir
That clambers up
A man that fishes a cold
Mountain stream on Ochte bare.

(The Tower 51)

Crossing out and starting all over again, Yeats is trying to find the right word to describe the fisherman. In the next fragment he vacillates between the singular and plural:

Now will I write my testament
And choose
And choose once more for an heir
Young men

I write my testament being old
And choose for an heir young men & tall
Some tall young man
And choose once, that tall young man shall be my eir (sic)
Yeats seems certain about the opening line “I will write my testament and choose,” but beyond this point, he cannot make up his mind: should his heir be “Young men,” “young men & tall,” “Some tall young man,” or “that tall young man”? Each phrase differs in the degree to which “The Fisherman” lurks behind it. For example, “Some tall young man” sounds random and unspecific, and seems to have little to do with the earlier poem.

Trying out different epithets, Yeats is volume-controlling the allusion and measuring his distance from the past. At the end of this trial and error, he settles on “that tall young man,” which recalls “this wise and simple man” in “The Fisherman.” The difference between “this” and “that” suggests that some distance has now been created between the poet and his vision that is more than a decade old. As Yeats continues to write, he closes this temporal gap by calling him “A young imaginative man” (55) and turning him into his double. But in the final version, this continuity between the past, the present and the future becomes less certain. Yeats eventually decides on the plural “upstanding men” as his heirs:

I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and of Grattan
That gave, though free to refuse—
(ll. 126-33)
By changing the singular “imaginative man” to the plural “upstanding men,” Yeats subdues the echo of “The Fisherman.” Moreover, “upstanding” foregrounds their moral virtue rather than their qualification as poets. The word also contains a pun, “up-standing,” which contrasts with the poet’s “sedentary trade,” as he calls it later in the section. They are not poets but men of action.

This temporal gap between the speaker’s present self and the future is further widened by Yeats’s decision to remove a reference to John Synge. Instead of “[t]he people of Burke and of Grattan,” multiple drafts have “John Synge & those people of Grattan” (113), and Yeats deleted the Synge reference late in the revision process. One of Synge’s characteristics that Yeats admired was his indifference to the crowd. His poor health, Yeats recalls, “made him dislike, even in solitude, those thoughts which unite us to others, much as we all dislike, when fatigue or illness has sharpened the nerves, hoardings covered with advertisements, the fronts of big theatres, big London hotels, and all architecture which has been made to impress the crowd” (Essays 321). After the infamous riot at the performance of The Playboy of the Western World, Synge was “much shaken” but “wrote on as if nothing had happened” (329). He was “that rare, that distinguished, that most noble thing, which of all things still of the world is nearest to being sufficient to itself, the pure artist” (323). Synge’s presence in the drafts cements the idea of poetic lineage: the speaker will pass on the kind of poetic pride that protects artists from the demand of the mass audience.

But by replacing Synge with “the people of Burke and of Grattan,” Yeats weakens this artistic lineage between his past self, present self and heirs. Rather than focusing on this lineage, he focuses on eighteenth-century Ascendancy culture. After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the Protestants played an increasingly marginal role in politics. When the
Catholic-led new government introduced anti-divorce legislation in 1925, Yeats made a defiant speech by invoking his Protestant lineage:

I think it is tragic that within three years of this country gaining its independence we should be discussing a measure which a minority of this nation considers to be grossly oppressive. I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that minority. We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift; the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence. (qtd. in Brown 119)

Rather than creating the individual lineage between the poet and his heir, Yeats’s speaker invokes the national community to which both of them belong. The temporal continuity between the present and the future is based on this nationalist link rather than the solipsistic one between the poet and his imaginative vision. Both of these revisions—“upstanding men” and the elimination of the Synge reference—weak the artistic continuity between present, past, and future. In the finished poem, there is no longer the solitary figure of the fisherman who corresponds to the poet.

Yeats’s syntax embodies his growing doubt over whether he, as a poet, can forge such temporal continuity between the past, present, and future. The third and final section of the poem enacts this tension between the hope for continuity and the growing presence of death through the deployment of a sentence. The third section of “The Tower” consists of several long hypotactic sentences. Although most of these sentences begin with the assurance that there is a national continuity between the speaker and his heirs, they fade out into the speaker’s
recognition of his own death. This recognition of death, the physical condition of an aging body, is the ground for what Edward Said has termed as “late style.” According to Said, there are two types of late style. One is wisdom that comes with age, “a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity” as in Shakespeare’s late plays (6). The other—and this is pertinent to Yeats—is characterized by “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (7). Yeats’s sentences refuse to be harmonized into wisdom; they restlessly qualify the initial assurance of temporal continuity by reminding himself of his physical decay and his existential isolation.

In other words, the temporality of national community is troubled by the temporality of his dying body. After opening with “I declare,” the first sentence gradually widens the gap between the dying poet and his heirs:

Pride, like that of the morn,
Where the headlong light is loose,
Or that of the fabulous horn,
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

(ll. 134-44)
The passage goes from images of abundance and birth to the finality of death. “That of the morn” recalls the dawn in the closing line of “The Fisherman” and the prideful rejection of the mass audience. Its connotation of birth and new beginning yields to another set of positive images, the “fabulous horn” of plenty and “sudden shower.” But despite the fact that the poem started with “I declare” and that there is a blood-related, national lineage between the poet and his heirs, the sentence ends with the solitude of a dying swan, which Yeats spends more time elaborating. The speaker retreats from a group of heirs into his own death. While “the sudden shower / When all streams are dry” suggests that it might rejuvenate the dried-up streams and reach the audience, the swan song has no audience. Rather than passing down his legacy and dictating the future, the speaker is increasingly obsessed with his own death. Among all the similes he conjures up, the swan image interests him the most. “And there sing his last song” suggests that he is visualizing this image more vividly than the preceding ones.

Despite this gradual diminishment, the poet-speaker asserts the supremacy of his imagination to impose temporal order, but this brief moment of triumph is immediately questioned by the way Yeats’s syntax unravels and becomes fragmentary. He claims, “being dead, we rise, / Dream and so create / Translunar Paradise” (ll. 154-56). Soon after this grand claim that artistic creation transcends time, there is a stanza break, and the poem resumes with a less confident tone:

As at the loophole there
The daws chatter and scream,
And drop twigs layer upon layer.
When they have mounted up,
The mother bird will rest
On their hollow top,
And so warm her wild nest.

(ll. 166-172)

Immediately after the poet asserts his ability to transcend reality and create “Translunar Paradise,” the tower, a symbol of his creativity, turns out to be loosening as he finds the loophole where the “daws chatter and scream.” This qualification is emphasized by the oddity of Yeats’s rhyme scheme. Helen Vendler points out that the break between the first stanza and the second stanza is “anomalous” because the closing rhyme of “dream” and “scream” occurs across the stanza break (198). Vendler argues that this second stanza compares human art to the daw’s nest-making, suggesting that the poet “bequeaths to his successors not only the spiritual values of faith and pride, but also the instinctual values of warmth and generative power” (199). But the imperfect closing rhyme in the first stanza can also be read as undercutting the poet’s creative power. That is, like the tower, the verse form is also loosening. Indeed, the opening sentence of the second stanza is an incomplete clause (“As at the loophole there”) broken off the last lines of the previous stanza (“Man makes a superhuman / Mirror-resembling dream.”). Moreover, the rhyme of “dream” and “scream” across the stanza break exposes the poet’s dream of transcending time as fragile, recalling “The Fisherman,” where “dream” is broken by “cried.”

As the initial confidence of “I declare / They shall inherit my pride” continues to dwindle, this second stanza further diminishes the poet’s control over the future by switching from this performative utterance to “I leave both faith and pride / To young upstanding men.” While the former dictates the future, the latter leaves it up to the poet’s heirs. “I leave” does not guarantee the survival of “faith and pride”—his heirs might fail to inherit and preserve them. Accordingly, the complex sentence structure enacts the poet’s act of abdicating his control over the future:
I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain side,
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

(ll. 173-180)

As in the first stanza, the sentence opens up into the future, where his heirs will continue his legacy. But at this point, it becomes more uncertain, as the word “may” can be taken as either expressing the poet’s permission or his uncertainty over whether upstanding men will follow his footsteps, just like “Maybe” in “The Fisherman.” As Nicolas Grene puts it, “may” in Yeats is “a linguistic effort unable to lift itself into the security of the indicative” (154).

Moreover, like the previous sentence, this sentence does not continue his meditation on the future but ends with the recognition of his own approaching death—the temporal event that is outside the poet’s control. “Being of that metal made” seems at first to be modifying “They” in the previous line, but the past tense of the next lines (“Till it was broken by / This sedentary trade”) makes it clear that the phrase actually modifies “I”: he was made of the same metal as young men, until it was “broken” by his profession as a poet. In other words, as soon as the sentence moves into the future, it is pulled back by the poet’s present recognition of his approaching death. Just as “the loophole there” reminded the speaker of the fragility of his immediate surroundings, the demonstrative “this sedentary trade” disrupts his meditation on the
future by making him confront his physical condition. The shift from the plural “they” to “this” also sharpens the contrast between the plural posterity and the singular poet, and, all in all, the incompatibility of the two.

The tenuous link between the present and the future, between the dying poet and his heirs, is even more explicit if we compare the final version to the drafts. In a series of drafts, the poet-speaker plays a more active role in bequeathing his pride and faith. Moreover, the verbal echoes of “The Fisherman,” which connect the poem to the past, are clearer:

Yes to young men I leave all
Pride and faith, to young men
That ride upon horses and climb the water course
In grey Connemara cloth
That cast fly the eddying foam from hand up the mountain
Ready for [?trumpet] or beckoning hand
Messages or [?callings]
I leave them my pride and faith

I leave to sanguine men
Ready for
That want a beckoning hand a summon blast
And care not how it [?comes]
Or beckoning hand or blast

(75)
Not only does “grey Connemara cloth” allude to “The Fisherman,” the dying poet takes a more active role in leaving his pride and faith to them. Yeats rewrites the second passage by making the poet-speaker more present:

I blow a trumpet blast
I raise a beckoning hand

I call with that sound
And raise a beckoning hand
To cast their flies at dawn

My musical notes are blow[?]n
My beckoning hand is raised.

(77)

“Blow,” “raise,” “beckoning,” “call”: the passage proceeds by active verbs that mobilize the poet. This is not a simple act of passing on one’s legacy. He is an active guide to his young inheritors, ordering them to “cast their flies at dawn” with his poetry (“musical notes”). It is only in a later draft that Yeats starts to give more agency to his heirs:

They climb the river courses
In grey Connemara cloth
Up to where the source is
Amid its eddying froth
And cast a line as dawn
Breaks on the mountain side
I call these vigorous men
To inherit faith & pride
I beckon to these men
And offer faith & pride.

(85)

Now the role of the poet is more ambiguous: the young men find the source of the river, a symbol of poetic origin, on their own, and cast their flies rather than waiting for a “beckoning hand” to command them. On the same loose-leaf page, below this passage, Yeats writes a version closest to the finished version, removing “call,” “beckon,” and “source”—all traces of a poet actively passing down his poetic legacy. This sense of permission is faintly echoed in the final version, in “They may drop a fly,” but as I have suggested, it is ambiguous whether it should be read as a sign of the poet’s authority or of uncertainty.

Such poetic authority over the future diminishes in these drafts as Yeats changes “young men” to “sanguine men,” and then to “vigorous men” before settling on “young upstanding men” in the final version. “Sanguine” does not occur anywhere in Yeats’s *Collected Poems*. Perhaps its Latin etymology, “blood,” interested him, especially in this later period when he would openly talk about the nobility of aristocratic blood and the desirability of maintaining it. This rare adjective binds the poet to the young men by blood-based kinship, what Yeats refers to in “The Fisherman” as “my own race,” and here in “The Tower,” the people of Burke and Grattan. This connotation of blood kinship is softened in the draft above, where “sanguine” is replaced by “vigorous,” and the etymological “blood” is diluted into the river “source” of inspiration. “Vigorous” emphasizes the difference between the aging body of the poet and the physical health
of the young men. This difference further widens in the final version, where the active life of “young upstanding men” is differentiated from the poet’s “sedentary trade.”

The final sentence exemplifies the kind of restless qualification his revision exhibits about how much poetic authority the speaker can exert over the future. Although the speaker’s will is meant to dictate the future, he is aware of the gulf between himself and his imagined posterity. The final sentence of the poem dramatizes this tension. As it unfolds, the speaker’s poetic authority over time becomes more and more diminished. The sentence wavers between bodily decay and transcendence.

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of body,
(ll. 181-84)

By the fourth line, the sentence seems to read as a complete clause, “I will make my soul…Till the wreck of body.” “Make my soul,” an Irish idiom for “prepare for death” (Jeffares 223), suggests that he is waiting for his final moment. But such acceptance of death turns out not to be the case. “Till” introduces cascading images of decay in a paratactic rhythm, further extending the sentence:

Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come—
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye

That made a catch in the breath—

Seem but the clouds of the sky

When the horizon fades;

(ll. 185-93)

The list stops at “Seem.” It is emphatically introduced thanks to the initial trochaic substitution, but also because it is unexpected. “Till the wreck of body,” which seems like a complete noun phrase, actually turns out to be the subject of a belatedly announced predicate (“Seem but the clouds of the sky”).

This surprising syntactic twist introduces a moment of triumph over time. “Seem but” brushes aside the accumulation of death imagery in the preceding lines. Through the imaginative power of comparison, even bodily decrepitude becomes as insubstantial as “clouds of the sky.” This upward movement recalls “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death,” in which the speaker starts on the ground and flies up to the sky: “A lonely impulse of delight / Drove to this tumult in the clouds.” In “The Tower,” the soul departs from its study-room (“In a learned school”) to the sky (“Seem but the clouds of the sky”) as a gesture of transcending death.

The difference between the two poems, however, is that the dying poet refuses any harmonious end of the earlier poem (“I balanced all, brought all to mind”). “Or” introduces an alternative image to “clouds”: “Or a bird’s sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades” (ll. 194-95). As the poem gives us a panoramic picture of the sky, it now comes down to earth and zooms in on “a bird’s sleepy cry.” Again, we go from the plural clouds to the singular bird, and the effect is to emphasize the poet’s solitude. The bird’s cry could be taken as one last cry of defiance from the poet before the final sleep takes him over. But the generic “a bird” further
undermines the poet’s authority as it is not even the swan that stood for the poet’s pride. This second simile also cancels the earlier moment of transcendence by turning from the immaterial (clouds) to the corporeal (bird).

Moreover, the sentence ends not with the bird’s cry but “the deepening shades,” although Yeats could have given another line to conclude the ababcdcd rhyme scheme (death / breath, eye / sky, fades / shades, cry). The last quatrain is, in Vendler’s word, “defective,” missing the other half of the concluding rhyme, and “stands on the page for the cessation of the speaker’s breath, the death of his voice” (198). Moreover, the intransitive “deepening shades” acquires strong emphasis and agency. It activates “shades” not as the shade of a tree but the ever-growing presence of ghosts. The menacing agency assigned to “shades” is a far cry from the earlier confidence of “I declare.”

“The Tower” takes the symbol of the poet’s imaginative power as its title, but the syntax and the revision process that it goes through reveal a more strained relationship between time and the imagination. The poet’s ability to “transfigure,” to use J. Hillis Miller’s word, is repeatedly questioned in the revision, and his long sentences register his inability to manipulate time as he disappears into his own death.

Syntax in Ruins: “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”

Although “The Tower” ends with the dissolution of self, most of its elaborate sentences are grammatically complete. Terry Eagleton calls this “a kind of performative contradiction between what he says and the way he says it” (276). That is, even when the content is troubling, the tone that accompanies it is self-assured. Eagleton says: “There is a touch of the cavalier about Yeats’s use of formal devices to rise above anything as petty-bourgeois as personal anxiety or bemusement” (274). “Yeats’s syntax,” Eagleton claims, “preserves its integrity even when…it
makes a plausible feint of being just about to lose it” (278). His example is the second sentence of “Sailing to Byzantium”:

   The young
   In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
   —Those dying generations—at their song,
   The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
   Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
   Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
   (ll. 1-6)

A list of grammatical subjects continues over six lines until it arrives at the main verb “commend.” Although the way the sentence proceeds is confusing at first, it coheres eventually. Eagleton suggests that the self behind Yeats’s syntax is always in charge, only pretending to lose control (“a plausible feint”) but regaining it just in time. It is true that we can diagram Yeats’s convoluted sentences and make sense of them; however, the actual experience of reading them word by word does not correspond to the kind of syntactic integrity and the absence of real struggle that Eagleton seems to assign to Yeats. As I have shown, the twists and turns of Yeats’s sentences register a more troubled relationship between subjectivity and time.

The last poem I want to examine is “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” It is in this poem that Yeats’s syntax comes close to falling apart, as it bears the pressure of a political chaos that goes beyond the control of the poet-speaker. The poem was written in 1921, but Yeats dates it earlier to contextualize it in the period during which the tension between the Irish Republican Army and the English army was escalating, and the atrocities of the Black and Tans were becoming notorious. The historical setting of the poem is more troubling than that of “The
Fisherman” and “The Tower.” In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats sees the past as defunct, as the opening stanza suggests that all the cultural achievements of past civilizations were lost:

> Many ingenious lovely things are gone
> That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
> Protected from the circle of the moon
> That pitches common things about. There stood
> Amid the ornamental bronze and stone
> An ancient image made of olive wood –
> And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories
> And all the golden grasshoppers and bees.

(ll. 1-8)

In this temporal deadlock, the speaker cannot look back to the past to redeem it for the future, as he has done in “The Fisherman” and “The Tower.” There is no room for imagining a better future; instead, the present is nightmarish, dominated by political violence: “Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare / Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery / Can leave the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free” (ll. 25-28).

In this political milieu, the poet-speaker is powerless. He cannot look back to the past to forge a temporal continuity between the past, the present, and the future. Instead, he recedes into the collective “we” and never appears as the first person pronoun. There is none of the performative, “I do this, I do that” construction that draws attention to the poet’s empowered act of speaking. I will focus on the final moment in the poem, where neither “we” nor “I” is present.
to give imaginative order to this historical chaos. The final section is 17 lines long, made up of two sentences:

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;
Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded
On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,
But wearied running round and round in their courses
All break and vanish, and evil gathers head:
Herodias’ daughters have returned again,
A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;
And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,
According to the wind, for all are blind.
But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.
(ll. 113-30)

The irregular syntax of the first sentence mimes a sense of chaos. It begins with a fragmentary phrase, “Violence upon the roads: violence of horses,” which never gets integrated
A sense of grammatical confusion here corresponds to the speaker’s uncertainty over what this vision entails. Indeed, the sentence never focuses on a single vision, but quickly moves on to the next before fully comprehending it. The vision of garlanded horses with their “handsome riders” disappears in “All break and vanish,” and yields to the next scene where “evil gathers head: Herodias’ daughters have returned again.”

But this new scene is not detailed any further, as the poet’s visual focus never stays still. The specific reference to “Herodias’ daughters” is blurred into “A sudden blast of dusty wind and after / Thunder of feet, tumult of images, / Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind.” Again, syntax is off here, for we cannot be certain how these noun phrases are modifying the main clause, “Herodias’ daughters have returned again.” Are we to take these three lines as being in apposition to “Herodias’ daughters”? As Richard Ellmann points out, Yeats often takes away connectives to speed up his verse, and “insert an isolated phrase in a detached, ablative absolute relation to the rest of the sentence” (138). In the same way, the shortest line here, “Thunder of feet, tumult of images,” reads faster than the more natural “The thunder of feet, the tumult of images.” This frantic pacing of the line coincides with the blurring of a vision into sound (“Thunder”) and muddled non-specificity (“tumult of images”) as if the vision is so elusive that it can only be gestured to rather than described.

The next lines briefly zero in on a more particularized scene before it dissolves again:

And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,
According to the wind, for all are blind.

“Daughter” brings back one of Herodias’ daughters. But when “all” is repeated, its referent becomes unclear. All three daughters? All humans? To refer to the three daughters, “they” would
have sufficed. “All” is vaguer, especially compared with other instances of “all” in the poem. It is used 10 times in the preceding sections, most of which raise the poem to historical magnitude by attaching “all” to a noun. For example: “And gone are… all the golden grasshoppers and bees,” “We thought it would outlive all future days,” “All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,” “all triumph would / But break upon his ghostly solitude,” “all men are dancers and their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong,” “The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven: / That image can bring wildness, bring a rage / To end all things.”

Such use of “all” is typical of Yeats. Ellmann argues that in Yeats’s poetry, words like “this” and “all” “tease or entice the reader into granting the poet his assent” (138). For example, “that,” when used as an adjective, “implicates the reader in common awareness of what the poet is talking about, as if the poet’s world contained only objects which were readily recognizable” (138). The word “all” is another rhetorical device that sucks the outside world into the poet’s capacious imagination and “encompasses everything in what purports to be a familiar world” (138). Similarly, in The Structure of Complex Words, William Empson points out that Milton uses “all” in Paradise Lost for 612 times, partly because it matches the cosmic scope of the poem, which is about “all time, all space, all men, all angels, and the justification of the Almighty” (101). Moreover, Empson argues that the word is perfect for Milton’s sensibility “because he is an absolutist, an all-or-non man”: “It is as suited to absolute love and self-sacrifice as to insane self-assertion. The self-centered man, in his turn, is not much interested in the variety of the world, and readily lumps it together as ‘all’” (101). The last remark is fitting to Yeats’s typical use of “all.” By referring to the world as “all,” Yeats casts this inclusive verbal net to comprehend an immense political chaos.
But in the final section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” “all” is not as all-encompassing. Unlike the previous instances of the word, “all” here is repeated without being anchored to a particular noun: “All break and vanish,” “All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries, / According to the wind, for all are blind.” In a draft, the first example reads “They break and vanish,” making it clear that the subject is “horses.” The revision foregrounds the magnitude of this apocalyptic vision. As “all” is repeated, the vision is widening, zooming back further and further until individual particulars and actors become indistinct, and the speaker’s vision blurred. There is something menacing here, but the poet cannot fully grasp it. The magnitude of historical calamity is such that the individual speaker can only gesture to it with this most generic word. In other words, “all” is not a sign of the poet’s mastery but the last resort to refer to the political calamity that goes beyond description.

The closing sentence of the poem, however, sharpens the poem’s verbal lens. It mirrors the speaker’s struggle to bring the political chaos under his imaginative control. Although he zeros in on the particulars, however, the sight clears only to introduce, in the words of Michael Wood, “the drumbeat of a different nightmare” (135):

But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.

The vision is clarified, anchored to the present from which the speaker narrates: “But now wind drops, dust settles.” The poem slows down as it departs from the iambic and anapestic cadence of
the previous lines to the heavily stressed and punctuated “But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon….” This slowing down would have been less effective if Yeats had supplied “the” for “wind” and “dust,” which would sound more natural. While the previous sentence uses “and” and semicolons as a simple way of joining clauses, “Thereupon” points to the presence of a consciousness organizing events into a chronological or causal order. The next word “There lurches past” functions just as “that” and “all” work in Ellmann’s account: we see the poet gesturing toward what he sees, and integrating it into the poem.

The very sentence structure of the final main clause bespeaks this controlling consciousness. Unlike the previous sentence, this sentence begins with the main verb (“There lurches past”) and the description of Artisson’s physical attributes (“his great eyes without thought,” “stupid straw-pale locks”), hence delaying the grammatical subject. One can write such an inverted, hypotactic sentence only if he has mapped out how the sentence should look from the beginning. Just to expand on the Milton-Yeats link, compare the above passage to the opening lines of Paradise Lost, where Milton’s periodic sentence displays the same syntactic contortion:

    Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
    Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
    Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
    With loss of Eden, till one greater man
    Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
    Sing heavenly muse…

(ll. 1-6)
Like Yeats’s, this sentence knows where it is heading. One can imagine Milton starting the sentence with “Of,” knowing that it will go with the verb “Sing.” This grammatical suspension allows him to expand the prepositional phrase, relating the whole human history over five lines. To put this another way, Milton can write this inverted sentence because history is under control—there is no question that it goes from paradise lost to paradise regained, pulled forward by the Christian telos. Accordingly, his sentence moves forward, knowing it will find its main verb with no difficulty.

Yeats’s final sentence expresses the same desire to bring history under his syntactic control. The final three lines have puzzled critics for their strange specificity, but the effect is to bring the poem into sharp focus after the chaos of the previous scenes. As the poem’s vision zeros in on the character, the tempo slows down at a heavily spondaic line: “Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks.” The frenzy of a rushing, fragmentary sentence seems to have ceased in this newly revealed scene. It feels more controlled because the poet makes it sound like a world that should be familiar to us. He points us to “That insolent field Robert Artisson” as if the poet assumes we know what he is talking about. Similarly, “the love-lorn Lady Kyteler” sounds as though we are supposed to know the story behind these two characters, although in truth it was so unfamiliar to Yeats’s readers that he added a note to the end of the poem when it was first published. He explained that Artisson “was an evil spirit much run after in Kilkenny at the start of the fourteenth century” (qtd. in Jeffares 235). Being the most specific, most imagistic of the whole section, the final line manages to concretize this elusive vision: “Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.” This final, anchoring effect is also metrical, as the poem slows down at a heavily accented line: “Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.” The order
of rhyme returns, too: after a series of off-rhymes—even the non-rhyme of “images” and “cries”—the poem finally settles on two full rhymes: “thought / brought” and “locks / cocks.”

But despite this new formal order, the time of violence resists the speaker’s desire to transform it into a vision. Jahan Ramazani lists the ending of “The Magi”—“Being By Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied, / The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor”—as an example of how Yeats “obtrudes into the speech rhythm a polysyllabic word that contains a dactylic cadence, varying the predictable sequence” (119). But what is unusual about the ending of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is that it does exactly the opposite. Polysyllabic words like “turbulence,” “uncontrollable,” and “bestial” are rich in semantic and historical implications and, if introduced into the poem’s closure, could have lifted it beyond the localized scene into a more far-reaching apocalyptic vision. But the poem ends by narrowing itself into a mostly monosyllabic and densely imagistic line: “Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.” An apocalyptic vision does not appear at the end. The poem introduces a more localized substitute. Moreover, instead of lingering on Artisson, the poem goes on to end with, as Wood points out, “a touch of documentary detail about one of his admirers” (207).

“Documentary detail” is important in considering the poem’s tempo and temporality. Although the poem is obsessed with the present (The original title of the poem was “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World”), and although the final sentence starts with “now,” it ends with the past tense, emphatically introduced by the full-rhyme of “thought” and “brought.” In the final line the poem does not open onto the future, as many of Yeats’s poems do, like “The Fisherman” or “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” But rather, the ending of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is atavistic rather than revivalist; there is no poet-figure who looks back to the past and then forward to the future. The final line shuts down the poem to any future change or
revelation, but the repetition of the same old terror from the fourteenth century. This is not a
typical ending for Yeats. Elsewhere, his poet-speaker sounds like a prophet, proclaiming, “Surely
some revelation is at hand” or “A terrible beauty is born.” Indeed, Wood argues that Artisson’s
appearance is different from the “rough beast” of “Second Coming,” which announces “the new
order [the beast] will bring, the end of a cycle,” for “there will be no new order” in the wake of
Artisson (209).

The final line resists this desire for closural order, for a profound, prophetic statement
that makes sense of the vision. There is something that goes beyond any rational, all-
encompassing view of history. There is a touch of randomness about the poem’s sudden shift
from a wide-ranging long shot to an extreme close-up on these particular figures. In The Sense of
an Ending, Frank Kermode argues that fiction writers use narrative to redeem chronos, a mere
succession of events, into kairos, a point in time “charged with a meaning derived from its
relation to the end” (47). The end of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” does not enact this
transformation, as it does not allow us to move into a bird’s-eye view, a pattern or structure that
helps us make sense of this chaos. Rather, it ends with a close-up that blocks our future vision. In
this bleak poem the poet’s role is minimized: he is no longer a prophet (e.g. “I shall have
written” in “The Fisherman”) or a poet who can dictate the future (e.g. “I declare / They shall
inherit my pride” in “The Tower”). The pressure of political reality increases far beyond that of
the mass audience that troubled him earlier. In this apocalyptic poem his syntax enacts the strain
of a large-scale political chaos upon his subjectivity by almost falling apart.

As I have demonstrated in discussing the three poems, Yeats’s struggle to impose order
on time is dramatized by the complex working of his sentences. By illuminating elements of
disorder, we can bring Yeats closer to what we now call modernist literature. In his career as a
poet, Yeats often criticized modernist writers. Virginia Woolf wrote in a diary entry about her meeting with Yeats in 1934:

Old Yeats. What he said was, he had been writing about me. The Waves. That comes after Stendhal he said. I see what you’re at—But I want more humanity. Cant bear Stendhal; observant: photographic; has a passion for Balzac; read & re read. Because his people are planted in history: there they are…. (Diary IV 255)

“Planted” recalls “rooted in one dear perpetual place” from “Prayer for My Daughter,” where Yeats envisions Anne Yeats forever in touch with her native soil and tradition.\(^4\) In the same way, Yeats resisted being deracinated by the chaotic temporal experience of modernity. In his introduction to “Fighting the Waves” in 1934, Yeats writes that in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Woolf’s *The Waves*, and Pound’s *Cantos* he found “a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint; man no hard bright mirror dawdling by the dry sticks of a hedge, but a swimmer, or rather the waves themselves. In this new literature . . . man in himself is nothing” (703).

Yeats does not allow his subjectivity to be completely drowned by the flux of time. Often his poems stage speakers who are empowered by his poetic speech, manipulating time, looking to the past, and imagining a future. But the close examination of his syntax suggests that his temporality is far more complex. Just like his fellow modernists, he is well aware that he cannot simply triumph over a deluge of experience and redeem time past. The very temporal nature of

\(^4\) See also “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited,” where Yeats recycles the plant imagery: “Childless I thought, ‘My children may find here / Deep-rooted things’” (ll. 36-7). In the poem’s final section, he writes:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.  
(ll. 41-44)
the sentence—the way it unfolds on the page, word by word—amplifies his ongoing struggle with the time that keeps resisting the grasp of his imagination.
Chapter 4: Modernist Lyric: Pound, Eliot, and the Tempo of History

The two themes central to my discussion of Yeats’s tempo—subjectivity and temporality—have come to the fore in the recent renewal of lyric studies. The 2008 January issue of *PMLA* contained a section called "The New Lyric Studies." Since then a number of major works on the subject have been published, including *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2013) edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, and Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* (2015). I want to frame my discussion of modernist poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot by first referring to this recent trend and the critical assumptions that underlie it. I argue that while Yeats fits well with the critical assumption that the lyric centers on subjectivity rooted in the present moment of speaking, Pound and Eliot subvert it by subordinating the presence of a lyric speaker to the pastness of history. In Yeats’s poetry, although time resists his imposition of aesthetic order, we are always aware of the strong presence of subjectivity, of a speaker looking back to the past in the hope of bringing back its unrealized potential into the future. In the poetry of Pound and Eliot, the speaker does not occupy this empowered position in the present—rather, the present is impoverished compared with the vivid presence of the past.

Most critics agree that lyric poetry is by definition the expression of a poet’s or speaker’s subjectivity. There has been some question about the fallacy of identifying poet with speaker, but the essential point about subjectivity remains the same. Herbert F. Tucker reports that until about 1940 teachers encouraged students to read poetry as an expression of the poet’s subjective feeling, but that by 1960 what came to dominate classrooms was the view that a poem is spoken by a dramatic speaker distinct from the poet (240). As Jonathan Culler says, when we read a

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poem, we are taught to “imagine or reconstruct a context: identifying a tone of voice, we infer
the posture, situation, intention, concerns, and attitudes of a speaker” (“Changes in the Study of
the Lyric” 38). This dramatic approach to lyric poetry has been useful in preventing us from the
naiveté of assuming a poem as a “sincere expression of emotion” (Culler, “Lyric, History, and
Genre,” 891).

Against this dramatic emphasis, Culler posits the present tense as common to all lyrics in
Western literature, particularly English-language poetry. He points out that we tend to read lyric
poetry as a psychological drama, and in doing so, we read it under the auspices of narrative: “it is
deadly for poetry to try to compete with narrative—by promoting lyrics as representations of the
experiences of subjects—on terrain where narrative has obvious advantages” (“Why Lyric?”
202). Culler differentiates narrative time from lyric time by arguing, “If narrative is about what
happens next, lyric is about what happens now—in the reader’s engagement with each line”
(203).

This special lyric temporality is exemplified by apostrophe, a poetic address to someone
or something imagined as present. Apostrophe “resists narrative because its now is not a moment
in a temporal sequence but a now of discourse, of writing” (“Apostrophe” 152). For example,
when one addresses an absent person or object with “O,” the narrative sequence of “this happens,
then this happens” ceases to exist. “O Wild West Wind” is not an event in the past—it takes
place as immediately present, as if the speaker is voicing these words at the moment of our
reading. In other words, apostrophe is “a monument to immediacy, which presumably means a
detemporalized immediacy” (152). Culler further argues that lyric thrives on “not the description
and interpretation of a past event but the performance of an event in the lyric present, the eternal
now of lyric. What lyrics demand of the world is often something to be accomplished by the
performativity of lyric itself” (“Comparing Poetry” xi). That is, when we read a poem, we
“perform” or give voice to it by enunciating it word by word, line by line, as if the speaker is
doing so in the present, rather than imagining it as a text written long ago.

Similarly, Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that this act of voicing in the “now” of reading
produces the individuated presence of a lyric speaker. “The ‘I’ in poetry,” Blasing argues, “is
both the generic ‘I’ of language and an individuated ‘I’ sounded by the materials of language”
(27), which is not the same as a poet who exists outside the language of a poem. Despite the fact
that language is constructed and abstract, we find a lyric speaker individuated thanks to “an
experience of linguistic materials that are in excess of what can be categorically processed—an
experience guaranteed by the formality of poetry” (27). As in Culler’s account, Blasing
emphasizes as a source of individuation “the material experience of the somatic production and
reproduction of words as sounds and sounds as words” (27). That is, we have the “material” or
“somatic” experience at the very moment when we read words on the page and feel the
immediate presence of a lyric voice enunciating them.

Both Culler and Blasing single out this special “now,” in which the act of reading or
voicing makes a speaker individuated and physically present at the moment of our reading. In
Lyric Time Sharon Cameron carries this privileging of the present and individuation to an
extreme by arguing that in lyric poetry time is so compressed that it becomes the eternal present,
a “still life,” and “contracts its own meaning” (240). Cameron’s metaphor is markedly spatial—
she differentiates poetry from drama or narrative by claiming that in lyric poetry “movement is
not consecutive but is rather heaped or layered. This stacking up of movement, temporal forays
cut off from linear progression and treated instead as if they were vertically additive” (240-41).
In other words, the lyric abolishes temporal flow and immortalizes the voice of a speaker: “All
lyrics posit speech outside of the action from which they exempt themselves, and such a retreat is inevitably bound up in ideas about the revision of temporality” (243). Cameron characterizes this revisionary or transformative power over time as the preoccupation of the lyric, “the collapsing of eternity into immortality in the designated space of the present” (260). Cameron’s formulation of the lyric amplifies what is dormant in Culler’s more recent lyric theory: the present is so intense, so privileged that it becomes timeless, an ever-repeatable, eternal “now.” It exempts the lyric from the flux of time, expressing the age-old notion that art conquers time and saves a human voice from vanishing.

But this empowered present of lyric poetry does not hold well when we look at the poetry of Pound and Eliot, and this is where they diverge from Yeats. Peter Nicholls singles out modernist lyric as a genre that complicates the notion of lyric as spoken by the first-person speaker. He argues that “modernist poems are designedly hybrid things and that while literary critics have given the genre a high profile, many modern and contemporary poets have followed the Victorians in their awareness of the limits of lyric, seeking to frame it with varying degrees of scepticism and irony” (177). As we will see, the poetry of Pound and Eliot challenges such affirmative individuation and the privileging of the lyric present. They both started their poetic careers by continuing the Victorian tradition of dramatic personae, staging characters such as Altaforte and J. Alfred Prufrock. But their speakers are often diminished by the intense temporal experience in which the past is more vividly immediate than the present from which they speak. Their subjectivity is diminished, too weak to bring the intrusion of the past into the present under their control, and syntax registers their struggle.

A major difference between Yeats and the two modernists is the degree of this struggle to impose aesthetic order on time. Yeats’s syntax tries to rein in the temporal experience that goes
beyond the control of his subjectivity, and almost falls apart before reconstituting itself. To put this another way, Yeats’s syntax has the paratactic impulse toward chaotic arrangement of words and temporal experience, but by sheer force of will, his speakers manage to bring it into the order of hypotaxis, or at least the appearance of it. Yeats shies one step away from the chaos of temporal experience by insisting on the presence of mastering subjectivity. Pound and Eliot carry Yeats’s impulse toward parataxis even further by showing the dissolution of the self overwhelmed by temporal experience. Their syntax displays a weakened organizing consciousness that cannot impose order on what Yeats identified in modernist literature as “a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint” (703).² I will examine the opening of Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s “Gerontion” and their collaboration on *The Waste Land*. All three poems collapse the past and the present onto one temporal plane. But the past breaks into the present moment of speaking so intensely that it drowns the presence of a speaker.

**Time of Parataxis: Canto 1**

Parataxis is a hallmark of modernist poetics as explained by Pound. In the famous “A Few Don’ts,” Pound defines “Image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (“A Retrospect” 4). “An instant of time” because, in poems like “The Station of the Metro,” two objects are brought together without grammatical connective, hence omitting the time it would have taken for a speaker to perceive and verbalize that perception. Rather, the perception is compressed as if it were happening in “an instant of time”:

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Personae 111)

Pound omits connectives such as “The apparition is like petals on a wet black bough,” or “When I saw the apparition of these faces in a crowd, I thought of petals on a wet black bough.”

Parataxis omits the time that it would take for comparing one object to the other or recollecting an emotion in tranquility. The time of perception is accelerated and feels more immediate and individuated, for it is unique to the speaker at this very moment of perception.

When this paratactic immediacy is carried further, however, syntax starts to appear more like a random pile of noun phrases with little sense of a perceiver’s presence. Pound’s Canto 1, the first of his unfinished epic Cantos, is a case in point. In this poem, parataxis does not present an affirmative moment of perception, because the speaker is overwhelmed by temporal experience to the point of being diminished by it. I will analyze the poem in terms of his revision and show how subjective and temporal diminution is more pronounced in the finished work. In 1909 Pound wrote to his mother: “An epic in the real sense is the speech of a nation thru the mouth of one man” (qtd. in Moody 122). His first attempt at the epic, Three Cantos, appeared in Poetry from June to August in 1917. The last part of this sequence retells Book 11 of the Odyssey, in which Odysseus descends to the underworld. Pound turned this into the opening canto of his later epic The Cantos. In revising Three Cantos into the opening of The Cantos, Pound shifted his focus away from “the mouth of one man” to multiple voices, including the present speaker as well as voices from the past. In doing so, Pound subordinates the voice of his speaker to the towering presence of history that diminishes it.
In *Three Cantos*, we immediately notice the presence of a speaker rooted in the present moment of speaking. Indeed, the modern speaking voice in the style of Robert Browning is already audible in the very first line of the poem: “Hang it all, there can be but one Sordello!” This colloquial language also recalls that of *Personae*, Pound’s early collection of persona poems. For example, “Sestina: Altaforte” begins: “Damn it all! All this our South stinks peace.” As Ronald Bush points out, when he was composing *Three Cantos*, Pound “was then more interested in dramatic technique than in structure, and he attempted to model *Three Cantos* after the most sophisticated example of dramatic narration he could discover” (75). In the last of *Three Cantos*, before giving his English version of a Latin translation of the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus, Pound returns to this colloquial voice that started the poem. He foregrounds the presence of a modern speaker translating the Latin:

I’ve strained my ear for ensa, ombra and ensa
And cracked my wit on delicate canzoni—
Here’s but rough meaning:
“And then went down to the ship”

(*Personae* 243)

The quotation marks announce that the speaker is introducing the translated text. In other words, in this earlier version of the opening canto, the literary past is subordinated to the present moment from which the speaker narrates.

While *Three Cantos*, as Hugh Kenner suggests, reveals “an anxiety about keeping control” by foregrounding the presence of an organizing consciousness (360), Canto 1 weakens that presence by subjecting the individual perception of time to a larger, historical time. As he composed Canto 1, Pound became less interested in organizing the poem around the voice of a
modern speaker and more in the method by which all history is collapsed onto one temporal plane.

We can see this cultural overlayering in the fact that the poem fuses the voices of Homer, Divus, and Pound’s modern speaker. It does not center on the dramatic speaker whose voice is readily announced in the very opening line of the earlier version (“Hang it all, there can be but one Sordello!”). Instead, the new Canto begins, “And then went down to the ship,” the first line of Pound’s translation of the *Odyssey* from the final section of *Three Cantos*. The opening conjunction “And” also cedes the speaker’s control over the material by acknowledging that his epic is a continuation of someone else’s work. Toward the end of the poem, when the speaker interrupts his rendering of Divus’s Latin translation of the *Odyssey* and asserts his own presence, this modern voice blends with the voice of the past:

> And then Anticlea came.

> Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus,

> In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.

(ll. 67-69)

“Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus” sounds similar to the modern voice that dominates *Three Cantos* and so different from the archaic voice that retells the *Odyssey*. But the voice of a modern speaker and that of Odysseus and Divus are not differentiated as there are no quotation marks that set off one from the other. (In *Three Cantos*, there are quotation marks and a section break between the last line of the translation and “Lie quiet Divus.”)

In the same way, Pound’s parataxis collapses the past and the present onto the same temporal plane. But unlike Yeats, who can impose hypotactic order on a pile of paratactic phrases, Pound represents the intrusion of the past voices into the present moment as a chaotic
temporal experience that compromises the speaker’s subjectivity. In the final version of Canto 1, Pound’s parataxis becomes so confusing that it undermines narrative or characterial coherence. The following scene stages an ancient Greek practice called Nekyia in which, as Carroll Terrell explains, “the ghosts of the dead are called up and consulted about the future” (1). Pound does not use words like “then” and “and,” which makes the tense uncertain while the poem catalogues the dead:

Dark blood flowed in the fosse,
Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides
Of youths and of the old who had borne much;
Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,
Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,
Battle spoil, bearing yet dreary arms,
These many crowded about me…
(ll. 28-34)

The emphasis here is on rhythmic intensity over narrative. Pound suspends the narrative through this chant-like rhythm, which originates not just from alliteration and double stresses, but also from repetitions of the same or phonetically similar words: “Souls out of Erebus . . . Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,” “these many crowded about me; with shouting, pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beast . . . cried to the gods.” Accordingly, we leave behind the narrative past that began this scene (“Dark blood flowed in the fosse”) as the sentence moves into a procession of tenseless nouns with no conjunctions to connect them, until it becomes more grammatically normative with the last line: “These many crowded about me.” Pound’s sentence becomes even more fragmentary than Yeats’s before it reconstitutes itself by returning to the
narrative past. The effect is disorienting. Bush points out: “The seafarer rhythms and the archaism distance the passage, make it unfamiliar and unsettling. The practice of libations, funeral burnings, of crying out loud to the gods, all conjure up the experience of an archaic ritual” (131). But this unsettling effect does not just come from the sentence’s archaic rhythm. Pound’s syntax is off, missing key grammatical elements as if the past and the words that render it were breaking loose from the narrator’s organizing consciousness.

As the past breaks into the present moment of narration, grammatical and syntactic confusion ensues, as if the speaker is overwhelmed by this temporal experience. The shift of agency away from the act of speaking to the presence of the past is apparent in some of the changes Pound made to the rite scene. For example, in Canto 1 Pound omits the part where Odysseus speaks to Anticlea, his mother. The finished version reads “And then Anticlea came. / Lie quiet Divus.” The corresponding lines in Three Cantos read:

Came then Anticlea, to whom I answered:

“Fate drives me on through these deeps; I sought Tiresias.”

I told her news of Troy, and thrice her shadow

Faded in my embrace.

Then I had news of many faded women

Tyro, Alemen Chloris—

Heard out their tales by that dark fosse, and sailed

By sirens and thence outward and away,

And unto Circe buried Elpenor’s corpse.

(245)
In this passage Odysseus communicates with his dead mother, but this is the only moment in the poem that the dead remain silent. Pound might have omitted this passage because it foregrounds Odysseus’s act of telling his story to his mother. Reworking *Three Cantos*, Pound shifts his focus away from narrative and the epic told by one speaker. Instead of a modern speaker meditating on history, Pound wants to bring back the past into the present through a ritual, or in Longenbach’s words, not through “the digging up of the past ‘as it was’ in order to be examined and classified, but [through] the artistic, visionary process of imbuing the past with the life of the present” (111).

But the past, brought into the present moment of narration, is so intense that it compromises the speaker’s narrative control over it and throws the poem off-tempo. The focus of this ritual is not a character-based story centered on the voice of a hero. It is a verbal ritual in which words take precedence over speakers. Accordingly, syntax becomes confusing especially in the following lines where Odysseus performs the rite:

> These many crowded about me; with shouting,
> Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;
> Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze;
> Poured ointment, cried to the gods,
> To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;
> Unsheathed the narrow sword,
> I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead,
> Till I should hear Tiresias.

(ll. 34-41)

This is the longest sentence in the poem, and its syntax looks odd. For example, it is not clear who is doing these actions: “Slaughtered . . . Poured . . . and cried to the gods.” This is even
more confusing in this final version because Pound replaced a period after “Proserpine” with a semicolon. With a period, we would have easily figured out that the subject of “Unsheathed” is Odysseus. With a semicolon, however, “Unsheathed” seems to be part of a series of active verbs (“Slaughtered,” “Poured,” “Cried,” Unsheathed”) that all modify the same grammatical agent. Even with a period, it is not obvious who is performing these actions—whether it is the dead, “my men,” or the speaker “I” who “slaughtered,” “poured,” and “cried.” This grammatical confusion obscures the presence of Pound’s speaker. The speaker seems unaware of this confusion, as this narrated ritual of bringing back the dead is so intense that the past threatens to break away from the narrative past into the present and dominate the passage. This is the extreme version of the paratactic impulse that we saw in Yeats. While Yeats would manage to suggest grammatical coherence to capture an intense vision, Pound more explicitly registers in his paratactic syntax the chaos of such perception and the resultant diminution of the speaker’s presence.

**Tempo and History in “Gerontion”**

In Pound’s poem the past invades the present vividly, breaking away momentarily from the narrative past into a tenseless vacuum of noun phrases. Accordingly, the perceiver of this vision is diminished, without being able to impose the kind of syntactic order Yeats would create on his temporal experience. It is unclear whether Pound thought of such diminution of subjectivity as negative: the past is brought intensely back to the present, as the speaker becomes a kind of visionary medium in whom the past and the present converge. But in Eliot’s 1919 poem “Gerontion” the voice of the past crowds about the dramatic speaker not at all in an affirmative way—it merely emphasizes the impoverished state of the present by contrast. The present
moment of speaking, which is privileged by Culler and other theorists of lyric poetry, becomes evacuated, overwhelmed by historical past.

The opening of the poem sets in motion the tension between the speaker’s impoverished present and the grand past he yearns for. The poem stages a dramatic speaker who is already diminished by time, an old man who did not fight in war. But through his elaborate sentences, he tries to construct a fiction in which he actually fought in a war reminiscent of a classical setting. This gap between the present and the past is registered by the opening syntax, which starts out as grand but is thrown off-kilter toward the end:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.
(ll. 1-6)

Nothing can be more self-assertive than the opening line “Here I am.” The rest is equally self-dramatizing. In the first line, spondees put extra emphasis on this self-reference (“Here I am, an old man in a dry month”). The syntactic suspension of “Neither . . . Nor . . . Nor . . .” has a false grandeur. It denies Gerontion’s participation in war, probably the First World War, while giving him the opportunity to present himself as a soldier fighting in the classical era in a lofty parallelistic syntax (according to Southam (55), “the hot gates” is a literal translation of Thermopylae, a site of the battle between the Greeks and Persians in 480 B.C.). Spondees and assonance (“hot gates,” “warm rain,” “knee deep,” “salt marsh”) further assert the immediate
presence of a heroic setting, though it is dismantled by the negatives. In other words, this symmetrically constructed sentence admits that the speaker does not belong to this heroic, classical setting, but by prolonging the sentence, the speaker details and indulges in a war scene in which he did not participate. “Fought” is a belated add-on, as if he utters this verb of military valor at the last minute to stretch the “Neither . . . nor” construction to a breaking point. The odd syntax of these opening sentences registers the speaker’s yearning for the grand past while suggesting his distance from it.

The voice of the present speaker, which is empathically announced by “Here I am,” becomes less and less audible, drowned by the voices of the past. For example, the opening sentence in which he asserts his individual presence is a borrowing from A. C. Benson’s biography of Edward Fitzgerald: “Here he sits, in a dry month, old and blind, being read to by a country boy, longing for rain.” Such drowning of the dramatic voice in the voice of the past often happens in this allusive poem. Several lines later:

Signs are taken for wonders. “We would see a sign!”

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,

Swaddled with darkness.

(ll. 17-19)

Gerontion’s voice fuses with the voice of the Pharisee (“‘We would see a sign’”). As Marjorie Perloff points out, the juxtaposition of the two voices within a single line “obscures the distinction between commentary and citation, the voice of the narrator and the voice of the Pharisee addressing Christ” (32). It is true that the quotation marks keep the two voices from completely blending into each other, but in the next line the speaker alludes to Lancelot Andrewes’s 1618 sermon for Christmas Day (“the Word without a word; the eternal Word not
able to speak a word”) without announcing it, hence furthering this vocal fusion. The dislocation of the speaker from the present is contrary to Culler’s idea of lyric present. As we have seen, Culler argues that the speaker becomes immediately present through our reading or voicing, and that, when the speaker enunciates, say, “I walk,” we are asked to imagine him or her performing the act. “Gerontion” upsets this coincidence between the speech and the present by making the subjectivity of the speaker porous to the voices of the past.

Indeed, when the speaker goes on to meditate on history in the second half of the poem, his speech acquires a ghostlier quality as if he is not coherent as a speaker or not fully individuated. R. P. Blackmur notes this when he complains that “Gerontion” is deficient in dramatic unity. “Obviously exciting and pungent,” he says, “it is not wholly intelligible” (46):

—the old man who is at once an individual, a person, and “gerontion” itself. It is a kind of Tiresias again; only without the “wrinkled, female breasts.” I mean he is an ideal figure self-seen, self-dramatized in a series of rapid, penetrating statements. Separately each statement is intelligible and sums a position in the drama. But the material between the statements is not always forced into being; and several times the reader finds his breath inexplicably cut short. (47)

This is a typical criticism of “Gerontion.” Perloff reports that most of the adversary critics of the poem, from Stephen Spender to Anthony Julius, are troubled by its apparent incoherence (21). “Here I am,” the poem begins, but the self-proclaimed immediacy of personal presence does not materialize. Blackmur continues: “Emotional unity is not accomplished, not articulated. There is a feeling of a buried unity, and of a struggle for an apparent unity . . . [“Gerontion”] does not control the material, does not qualify it personally enough” (47, my emphasis). When Gerontion stands back and starts talking about history, at first glance it appears as though he is rising above
time and bringing history under his control by discoursing on it. But as we will see, his speech is fragmentary, as the subjectivity behind it is not unified enough to make it cohere.

This lack of unity is registered by Gerontion’s failing tempo, in those moments in which his “breath” is “inexplicably cut short.” In a sense Gerontion is the opposite of Yeats’s speaker, who can sustain his breath in a series of long hypotactic sentences and subordinate time to his empowered subjectivity. Rather, Gerontion’s tempo registers the subjectivity whose enervation is emphasized by being contrasted to the grand past. His language retains the high rhetorical language reminiscent of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, but the subjectivity behind his speech does not seem as coherent. Hence, the tempo of Gerontion’s syntax quickens as if to discourage us from dwelling too closely on what he says, lest its coherence be detected:

> After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving.
(ll. 33-39)

Although Gerontion is now using discursive syntax to meditate on how history beguiles us, his language is vague, contributing to the impression of its fragmentariness. “Think now” shams the authority of rational argumentation, but what is said does not amount to coherent meaning. As Vincent Sherry puts it, this insistent framing of the statements with the imperatives “sets up a rhetorical fiction of deliberated, consistent significance” (The Great War 215). Despite
Gerontion’s repeated appeals to the intellect, we are discouraged from thinking because a series of unstressed syllables hurry us over each statement. Indeed, the poem’s tempo speeds up as the third section introduces a swarm of polysyllabic abstractions and the shortest of the vowels, i’s.

In a draft version of the poem, Eliot refers to “Nature” instead of “History.” The revision from ei to i amplifies the orchestration of this dominant vowel and its variants: “History,” “issues,” “deceives,” “whispering ambition,” “Think,” “gives,” “what she gives, gives . . . the giving.”

In Kenner’s words, Gerontion is “an auditory illusion within the confines of which the components of the poem circulate and co-exist. Rhythmic authority marshals these particulars, confers the illusion of personal coherence; the sense of personal presence can at any moment be resolved into a purely technical management of stresses and caesurae” (*Invisible Poet* 125).

Gerontion’s “I” simulates a dramatic persona consisting of different rhythms, voices, and contradicting statements that feign vocal coherence. In the above passage the i sound is repeated over and over in the subsequent lines, making us read irrational statements as quickly as possible:

Gives too late

What’s not believed in, or if still believed,

In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon

Into weak hands, what’s thought can be dispensed with

Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices

Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues

Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.
(ll. 39-47)

“Gives too late / what’s not believed in...if still believed,” “reconsidered passion. Gives too soon / Into weak hands,” “Think / Neither fear,” “impudent.” The light-footed music of Gerontion’s speech rushes us through each statement as if he does not want us to dwell on its coherence. Eliot’s recorded reading of the poem confirms this impression. He reads the passage rather mechanically, trying to get through each statement as fast as possible, making almost no pause after “guides us by vanities” and “reconsidered passion” despite the expected full stop.

The coherence of the speaker’s subjectivity is further called into question when this fast-paced, seemingly rational syntax works more like parataxis, as there is no connective between statements. Gerontion makes the most blatantly illogical statements when he says: “Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues / Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.” As Sherry points out, we are not sure how “an ‘unnatural vice’ can be biologically ‘fathered,’ and a vile unreal thing begotten from a natural good,” or “[w]hose ‘impudent crimes’ are capable of generating ‘virtues’” (215). Gerontion himself is aware of these contradictions, Sherry argues, as he “talks through them with every seemliness of reasonable and coherent meaning” (215).

As Gerontion’s subjectivity is diminished, he is left with the language and syntax of a literary past with no coherent subjectivity behind it. In the next passage, Gerontion tries to bring his meditation on history to the conclusion, repeating, “Think at last.” But he cannot proceed with it. There is no logical conclusion to talk about because there is no logical argument. Even the much repeated “I” becomes a rhetorical device to get the speech going:

Think at last

We have not reached conclusion, when I

Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.
I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact?

(ll. 50-60)

In such fast-paced syntactic tempo, the “I” becomes an entity that is not rooted in the present from which the speaker talks. Again, the Yeats comparison is useful: while Yeats’s “I” grounds his poems in the present moment of speaking, Gerontion’s “I” is a ghost of such fully fleshed-out lyric subjectivity. Indeed, the function of the first person pronoun here is to take over the task of “Think now” by stirring up the falling rhythm of the preceding statement. In the third section, the imperatives “Think now / Think / Gives” often follow a sentence that ends with an unstressed syllable. For example, the falling rhythm of “forgiveness” that concludes a sentence is then galvanized by “Think now.” The other instances of this rhetorical device include: “vanities” by “Think now,” “the craving” by “Gives too late,” “passion” by “Gives too soon.” This speech pattern suggests Gerontion’s rhetorical aridity: he finds his illogical statement gasping to a stop—Blackmur apprehends this when he says that “the reader finds his breath inexplicably cut short” (47)—but tries to galvanize his flagging speech by starting his next statement with a
stressed syllable. “I” in this passage works the same way: “honestly” gives way to “I that was near your heart,” “inquisition” to “I have lost my passion,” “passion” to “why should I,” “adulterated” to “I have lost my sight.” The first pronoun is repeated not for self-exposure but to rekindle the failing tempo of the poem.

This failing tempo, or what Blackmur calls “a gasp,” is indicative of the nature of Gerontion’s subjectivity. It is different from Yeats, who would bring his temporal experience under the control of his masterful subjectivity. Even when Gerontion meditates on history, what he says is more based on sonic persuasiveness than on philosophical verity. What appears as the subjectivity meditating on history in “Gerontion” turns out to be a hollowed self that does not have much individuality or coherence.

Both Canto 1 and “Gerontion” show Pound and Eliot’s shared temporal sensibility: that the present moment of speaking, which is central to the lyric, is no longer the site of possibility, of the “new,” as modernists are too often understood. This understanding of the present can be easily seen when we read their poetry in light of lyric theory, which is often based on the assumption of first-person speaker rooted in the empowered present moment. Both the speaker of Canto 1 and that of “Gerontion” fall into syntactic oddity, each self diminished by strong temporal experience in which the past invades the present. Pound’s parataxis and Eliot’s discursive syntax point to the presence of a self overwhelmed by temporal experience rather than, as in Yeats, mastering the flux of time.

**Memory and Desire: Time of Hypotaxis and Parataxis in *The Waste Land***

One difference between Canto 1 and “Gerontion” is that the latter reveals a touch of temporal longing—the desire to replenish the impoverished present (“an old man in a dry month”)—and the awareness that time cannot be redeemed. This yearning for lost plenitude
pervades *The Waste Land* and serves as a measuring rod to further differentiate Pound and Eliot’s temporal sensibilities. To characterize the temporality of each poet, I will examine their collaboration on this modernist masterpiece. Since the publication of the poem’s original manuscripts in 1971, it has been read too often as the story of Pound blue-penciling and improving the poem. Hannah Sullivan calls this recurring assumption “textual meliorism” (123) where readers of the manuscripts have explained Pound’s editing as making the poem more concise according to his imagist poetics. For these readers, Sullivan argues, numerous cuts he suggested for the poem exemplify “[a] triumphant Poundian act of salvage, a wresting of the jewel from the mud” (120).³

I want to interrogate this standard narrative in terms of syntax and the negative temporality that it registers. In the second section of *The Waste Land*, “A Game of Chess,” Pound’s editorial cuts do not necessarily make the poem more concise but rather exacerbate its confusing syntax. The section begins with a description of a rich interior rendered in dense hypotaxis. Eliot’s confusing and archaic syntax disperses the presence of characters while emphasizing the pastness of the setting. Here Eliot pushes himself in the direction he was going with “Gerontion,” toward temporal and subjective diminution. Pound’s cuts encourage him in this direction, too, rather than allowing him to write in a more concise, visual language.

Moreover, in some of these editorial moments, their difference in temporal sensibility becomes clear when Pound suppresses Eliot’s yearning for lost time. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot dramatizes the tension between this longing for the past and the awareness that it cannot be fully

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realized. This kind of personal yearning was not out of Eliot’s character. Ronald Bush identifies a similar tension between romantic sincerity and Laforgian skepticism in his early poetry:

In his youth he was determined—even compelled—to acknowledge his inner life, but the most deep-seated of his inhibitions told him that feelings and wishes were not to be trusted…. Devoted to the ideal of emotional honesty, Eliot’s early work scorns the easy expression of sentiment with what can only be called an excessive animus. (6)

Some of this “emotional honesty” breaks through in the Waste Land manuscripts in the form of nostalgia—the longing for the past plenitude that is no longer redeemable in the present. While Eliot accepts most of Pound’s suggestions, Eliot at one point decides not to accept his suggested cut and leaves a moment of temporal longing intact. It is this complex drama of their collaboration that I want to recover by focusing on its tempo and temporality.

Scholars have brushed aside the complex syntax of “A Game of Chess” in favor of discussing the sexual drama that the section enacts. The opening lines of “A Game of Chess” have often been read in light of Eliot’s strained marriage with his first wife. In June 26, 1915, Eliot married Vivienne Haigh-Wood after they had known each other for three months. She married Eliot, as she would later say to Bertrand Russell, to “stimulate him” (qtd. in Gordon 120). Vivienne read the manuscripts of The Waste Land and provided some of the memorable lines for “A Game of Chess.” But her response to this section was divided. She found a realistic dialogue between husband and wife “WONDERFUL” (WLF 11), but she was puzzled by the opening lines of the section, commenting in the margin: “Don’t see what you had in mind here” (11). Recent scholars have singled out these opening lines to talk about the poem’s sexual drama of husband and wife, often invoking the strained marriage of Eliot and Vivienne. But they tend to be unresponsive to the linguistic oddity of the opening lines of “A Game of Chess.” For example,
Colleen Lamos challenges the often-repeated criticism of Eliot as rigidly patriarchal by claiming that *The Waste Land* “depicts in painful and desperate ways the modern dilemma of masculine heterosexuality” (110). In “A Game of Chess,” Lamos argues, the male speaker is reduced into a violated female-poet, overpowered by a sexually alluring woman. In reconstructing this sexual drama, however, Lamos normalizes the opening lines into a scene more visually coherent than Eliot’s language warrants.⁴

Instead of the theme of gender and sexuality, I will focus on the sheer syntactic difficulty of these lines and the negative temporality that it registers. Recall how Djuna Barnes’s artificial hypotaxis obscures the individuality of her characters by making them part of the richly described furniture as well as the densely written prose style. These characters do not speak as standard fictional characters would, and Barnes’s prose constantly reminds us that they are entombed in the past, more like general types, puppets controlled by the towering presence of the historical past. Eliot’s characters in this section are also haunted by the past, and as his complex sentences unfold, their presence is more and more diminished:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Glowed on the marble, where the glass

Help up by standards wrought with fruited vines

From which a golden Cupidon peeped out

(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)

(ll. 77-81)

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⁴ Lamos reproduces the scene by using psychoanalytic terms:

A Cleopatra-like lady, enthroned upon a “Chair,” her phallic endowment expressed by her glittering “jewels,” her “fiery,” savage hair, and, especially, “her strange synthetic perfumes” that “drowned the sense in odours.” The lady’s “enclosed” and enclosing room is, bizarrely, a sea in which the self-pitying male subject comes to grief. (112)
The first line alludes to Enobarbus’s famous description of Cleopatra, as if this scene were a recast. The sentence moves forward, extended by “where.” But from this point on, the syntax becomes more complex as the sentence does not settle on the main verb, but keeps getting longer through two past participles (“Held up,” “wrought with”), before losing sight of its grammatical destination in another relative clause (“from which”). Accordingly, the presence of “she” is subdued. It is already diminished by sitting right next to the emphatically capitalized “Chair.” But as the sentence moves on, we leave her behind, entering the artificial décor, caught in the thick web of Eliot’s obscure hypotaxis.

What we are left with is the artificial syntax and language reminiscent of a past literary tradition. The pastness of such language drowns the presence of any personal voice. Such diminution of human voice is even more striking, because this opening passage comes at the heels of the urgently voiced coda of the previous section “The Burial of the Dead”:

“Stetson!

“You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

“Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,

“Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!

“You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable, mon frère!”

(ll. 69-76)

These closing lines of “The Burial of the Dead” display a series of grammatical moods that have vocal immediacy: the vocative (“Stetson!” “You!”), interrogative (“Has it begun to sprout? Will
it bloom this year?"), and imperative ("Oh keep the Dog far hence"). It is after this intensified presence of a speaker that we come to an overwrought periodic sentence in which human presence is hard to detect.

To illuminate further this dispersion of human presence through the thick web of literary language, I will compare the opening lines of “A Game of Chess” to Eliot’s earlier poem “The Death of the Duchess,” which Lawrence Rainey dates to September 1916, and from which Eliot recycled some of the lines in “A Game of Chess.” Eliot’s revisions tip the poem toward temporal and subjective diminution. The earlier poem is in the dramatic style of “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady.” The speaker feels trapped in a room with a woman. He wishes to escape, but he cannot because he is bound to her: “I should like to be in a crowd of beaks without words / But it is terrible to be alone with another person” (WLF 105). In “A Game of Chess,” these characters do not figure prominently as characters, as language takes over, drowning their presence in its artificiality. “The marble” (l. 78) was more specific and colloquial in the earlier poem: “We should have marble floors / And firelight on your hair” (WLF 105). The poeticism of “the marble” tips the passage toward the rhetorical language of Elizabethan drama. “The glass” is another vague poeticism. We may read it simply as a “mirror,” but the manuscript version reads: “Glowed on the marble, where the swinging glass…” (WLF 11). The reference is more precise in “The Death of the Duchess”: “My thoughts tonight have tails, but no wing. / They hang in clusters on the chandelier” (105). The revision further thicken Eliot’s artificial syntax and language, introducing “the glass” instead of a more colloquial, modern chandelier, hence drowning the presence of any modern human character in the language of the past.

This artificial syntax and language effects a sense of temporal stagnation. In Yeats’s poetry, for example, we feel the presence of a speaker who voices sentences, pushing them
forward, developing a thought. Eliot’s syntax, however, extends itself awkwardly, as though the sentence forgets what has been said before, without thinking of any grammatical destination. Kenner aptly contrasts Eliot’s syntax with Milton’s, which knows where it is going: “This isn’t a Miltonic sentence, brilliantly contorted; it lacks nerve, forgetting after ten words its confident opening (“The Chair she sat in”) to dissipate itself among glowing and smoldering sensations…” (Invisible Poet 153). This lack of syntactic forward momentum gets worse and worse as the sentence keeps complicating itself:

(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of seven-branched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;

(ll. 81-85)

“Doubled” seems to resolve the syntactic ambiguity of the “where” clause by serving as the main verb. But after such delay, it is hard to link this verb back to the subject four lines earlier. Moreover, which noun does it take as the grammatical subject—“The Chair,” “the glass,” or “a golden Cupidon”? Moreover, “as” and “it” at the line ending introduce one flicker of hesitation after another, making us ask: does “as” mean “like” or “while”? What does “it” refer to—“candelabra,” “light” or “table”? The confused syntax of these lines attests to the sense of temporal and psychological entrapment in the poem. These characters are locked up in the interior, their presence dispersed—there is no way out of this entrapment. Again to compare Eliot’s syntax to Yeats’s, the latter would gesture toward the bygone past as in “The Fisherman,” hoping it can be
recovered. Such movement between the past and the present does not happen, for the speaker here seems to have no memory, no backward look. Human presence is diminished, and the pastness of the narrative as well as that of literary language is foregrounded to the point of dominating the poem.

Some of its grammatical confusion is Pound’s doing, and this is where we can detect their shared interest in temporal and subjective diminution. The draft version of Lines 90-92 reads: “these ascended, / Fattening the candle flames, which were prolonged, / And flung their smoke into the laquenaria (sic).” Pound crossed out “which were” and suggested inserting “prolonged” as the adjectival past participle for “candle flames.” Eliot accepted the suggestion, condensed the line, and subdued the “tum-pum” of iambic pentameter: “In fattening the prolonged candle flames.” But as a result, the next line becomes even more disorienting:

In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
That freshened from the window, these ascended,
In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

(ll. 86-93)

In the draft, it is the flames that “flung their smoke into the laquenaria / Stirring the pattern in the coffered ceiling,” while in the final version, it is “these” (“odours” or “perfumes”?) that flung
their smoke. By the time we get to the end of this confusing sentence, we have left the initial “she” (“The Chair she sat in”) so far behind that it is completely forgotten.

The artificial syntax of the opening lines registers the sense of near-resignation with which Eliot uses language; this syntax has no forward momentum and has lost its power to gesture toward the possibility of temporal redemption. But there is a moment where some desire for lost time breaks through. This is where Eliot diverges from Pound in their collaboration:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice

(ll. 97-101)

Much has been said about the mythical method of layering the contemporary wasteland with the soon-to-be-tainted Garden of Eden (“sylvan scene”) and the violation of Philomela. We move from the detailed description of the woman’s room and her sexuality to a more historically-informed understanding of the present decay. But there is a more personal tone here that plays against the artificial setting, and this tone is more evident in the draft version: “Above the antique mantel was displayed / In pigment, but so lively, you had thought / A window gave upon the sylvan scene” (WLF 11). Pound strikes through “but so lively, you had thought,” commenting, “had is the weakest point” (11), presumably because of its grammatical fussiness. But the deleted second line contrasts the static and aged artifice of a painting (“Above the antique mantel was displayed / In pigment”) with the life-like immediacy of the scene (“but so lively”). This deleted line highlights a sharp contrast, pivoting on “but,” between the past and the
present: the painted nightingale looks “so lively,” implying that the present situation or the speaker himself is not, and that he longs for the liveliness of the past. Pound’s cut suppresses the nostalgic and also personal touch of this line—“you had thought” is the first use of a personal pronoun in the passage.

None of these personal touches survived, but the final version still reveals Eliot’s longing for temporal redemption through subtle shifts in syntactic tempo. The above sentence reads slowly, due to the inversion and wide gap between subject and verb (“Above the antique mantel was displayed . . . the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced”). But now after the semicolon introduces the next clause, the sentence speeds up because there is no punctuation or grammatical contortion to interrupt the flow: “yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice.” Enjambed for emphasis, “Filled” strikes a new note of plenitude, a full-throated birdsong loud enough to be heard across the vast desert, and the heard melody is made sweeter by liquid consonants (“the nightingale / Filled all…inviolable…”).

Moreover, “all” comes as a relief after the dense description of the room loaded with specific nouns (“The Chair,” “the marble,” “the glass” “the window,” “the laquearia,” “the coffered ceiling”). We go from this suffocatingly rich interior to the vast outdoor space of deserts. For Prufrock, “all” is a word for his unsayable yearning. He repeats this word obsessively, but his self-consciousness prevents him from articulating it: “I have known them all already, know them all—” (The Complete Poems 4). But in the Philomel passage, “all” is uttered with a sense of relief at the movement from indoor to outdoor and used to convey the sense of plenitude coming from this “inviolable voice.”

This nostalgia for the fullness of the past is felt even more strongly when we consider the fact that Eliot did not accept Pound’s suggestion to remove “inviolable.” Pound boxed in
“inviolable,” writing in the margin, “too penty” (11), although the line is not quite regularly iambic, the polysyllabic “inviolable” subduing the “tum-pum” of rhythmic regularity. What Pound disliked may be the touch of personal longing in “inviolable.” As Helen Gardner points out, Pound’s suggestion here reveals “a resistance seen elsewhere to the romantic and tender strain in the poem” (85). There is a certain irony in this because Pound himself used the same word and let it occupy a whole line of verse in his nostalgic celebration of returning pagan gods:

These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe,”

Inviolable.

(Personae 70).

Eliot did not accept Pound’s suggestion, the only time he did not in these opening lines. The drama of collaboration in The Waste Land manuscript reveals a slight difference between the two poets’ attitude toward temporality. While Eliot might want to keep some of his temporal aspiration and slips it in here and there through the cracked mask of impersonality, Pound encourages Eliot in the direction of even more diminution.

The same kind of quickening tempo, which suddenly opens up the poem to the desire for a better present, can be found elsewhere in The Waste Land. Indeed, as many readers have pointed out, The Waste Land is filled with such personal moments, including the hyacinth garden section and the final section “What the Thunder Said,” where the speaker thirsts for rain with increasingly urgency, wishing, “If there were water.” Even in the very beginning of The Waste Land Eliot’s “romantic strain” reveals itself in syntactic and rhythmic shifts. At first the poem begins with a series of complex sentences. They are stiff and symmetrical:

April is the crullest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

(ll. 1-7)

The opening lines are formalized. They follow the pattern of a present participle at the end of a line (“stirring,” “covering,” “feeding”), followed by a noun and prepositional phrase (“Dull roots with spring rain,” “Earth in forgetful snow,” “A little life with dried tubers”). The collective voice (“us”) has little urgency of a personal voice. Rather, the highly formalized syntax snuffs it out. The rigid form reinforces what the speaker says: since the coming of spring stirs our desire and makes us remember and want what has been lost, emotional numbness is more comforting.

The next lines break the syntactic pattern, releasing a sense of longing for the past. The female speaker, coming out of the snow of forgetfulness, finally begins to speak in her own words:

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With the shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

(ll. 8-16)
“Summer” makes us expect that this sentence will continue the syntactic pattern of extending the sentence with a present participle and prepositional phrase. On the surface it does follow the pattern with “surprised us, coming . . . with shower of rain.” But rather than breaking the line at “coming / Over the Starnbergersee,” Eliot extends it beyond the preceding lines. As the line gets longer after the present participle, it enters a particular geographical site that seems saturated with a personal memory: “Summer surprised us, coming over the Stanbergersee / With a shower of rain.” It has a feeling of release from the formalized pattern of the previous lines. Moreover, unlike the previous sentences that stop at a prepositional phrase, this one does not. A semicolon keeps it going, as if the speaker is flooded with memory and cannot stop: “with the shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade, / And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.” Unlike the regulated syntax of the previous lines, these lines feel more spontaneous because they are extended by coordinating conjunctions. It is as if the sentence proliferates as the speaker starts remembering, adding one memory after another.

Just like these opening lines, the nightingale passage in “A Game of Chess” gestures toward nostalgia. Marie contrasts the past plenitude to her present loneliness, saying, “In the mountains there you feel free. / I read much of the night and go south in the winter” (ll. 17-18), suggesting that here she does not feel free. Similarly, “There the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice” suggests that here such plenitude is unavailable. Eliot makes the same nostalgic gesture, the desire to bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present, to redeem the time past.

Although this temporal sensibility is at odds with Pound’s suggested cuts, Eliot makes sure to qualify this brief moment of nostalgia with the self-conscious recognition that such
temporal recovery is not available to the present speaker. Eliot kept the word “inviolable,” but what follows qualifies this romantic assertion through another shift in tempo:

yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.
(ll. 100-103)

After expressing his nostalgia with “there the nightingale,” in the next line he suggests that such a pure voice was not “there” in ancient Greece either, since the nightingale, Philomela, was violated (“still she cried”), and the violation continues in the present (“still the world pursues”). Hence, the melodious voice of the nightingale devolves into the grating noise of “‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” The next line confirms this suggestion of decay: “other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the wall.” “Withered” signifies the post-organic past unable to rejuvenate. “Upon the wall” terminates the imagined animation of the nightingale and reminds us of its status as a static painting. Accordingly, the meter becomes more mechanically iambic and repetitive (“And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / “Jug Jug” to dirty ears. / And other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the walls). We are back to the world of artifice.

The Pound-Eliot collaboration on The Waste Land reveals another dimension of complexity when read in terms of tempo and temporality. It reveals the complex drama of literary negotiation which goes beyond the issue of improving and compressing the poem. Where they agreed, we can see their negative temporality being registered by the obscure syntax of the passage; where they disagreed, we see Eliot’s yearning for past plenitude, which is often expressed through glimpses of personal memory. In the end, as in Woolf, this longing for a better
present lasts only briefly, and any possibility for temporal redemption is drowned by the unmelodious birdsong that symbolizes the eternal recurrence of violence and sexual aridity.

The issue here is not just about rhythm but about one’s temporality, one’s attitude toward life. Indeed, when Eliot criticizes Gertrude Stein’s repetitive style, he does so more on the ground of her temporal sensibility:

There is something precisely ominous about Miss Stein…. Moreover, her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested. (“Charleston, Hey! Hey!” 1927)

Here Eliot’s language is oddly moral (“ominous,” “it is not good for one’s mind”) and seems to suggest that Stein’s work is not forward-looking, progressive, but is rather atavistic (“barbarians”). Despite his criticism, however, he displays the very temporal sensibility that he assigns to Stein, through the mechanical rhythm of the final lines in the quoted passage. Such a moment registers the temporal sensibility that pervades the poem: the present as negative, almost degenerative, with little hope for temporal redemption.⁵

**Eliot v. Williams: Syntax of Renewal**

The relationship between tempo and temporality in *The Waste Land* can be better understood when we look at its counterpoint, William Carlos Williams’s *Spring and All*, which came out in 1923, a year after Eliot’s poem was published. I will examine the syntax and

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language of its opening poem (“By the road to the contagious hospital”), where Williams renders the dead landscape reminiscent of The Waste Land in paratactic sentences but revives it as the poem progresses.

In the prose section that leads up to the first verse section of Spring and All, Williams emphasizes the primacy of the “now” from the get-go: “The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested” (2-3). Williams claims that the very moment in which we live is felt as immediate through the power of the imagination, and that this force of renewal is arriving at this very moment: “In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new. Now at last the perfect effect is being witlessly discovered…. Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was” (9). Unlike Eliot, whose longing for past plenitude permeates The Waste Land, Williams foregrounds the power of the imagination to transform the present into whatever shape it pleases. As if to counter the life-negating opening of Eliot’s poem (“April is the cruelest month”), Williams proclaims: “at last SPRING is approaching.” He concludes the first prose section with this affirmative spirit: “Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW” (9). “An end” does not imply the end of the world, but the beginning of a new world.

In the first verse section of Spring and All, Williams starts where Pound and Eliot were in the poems I discussed: a paratactical pile of objects behind which there is little presence of an organizing consciousness. It seems that in this section we are at the same temporal deadlock, every image pointing to a lifeless, static landscape:

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

(ll. 1-8)
The sentence is fragmentary and proceeds with a series of nouns, with no main verb to energize them. “Contagious” sets the tone of this diseased landscape: it is cold, wasted, and full of “dried weeds.” The passive “dried” is more menacing than “dry” because it suggests an external force at work. The repetition of “standing” emphasizes static lifelessness. This paratactic sentence has little forward momentum, as there is no main verb to propel it. There is a flicker of verbs here and there in a series of present and past participles, none of which quivers into an active verb that would animate the sentence.

Indeed, the sentence does not seem to go anywhere—it stands still among dead natural objects. Williams’s language is as lifeless as the landscape it describes:

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—
Again, there is no main verb in this sequence of noun phrases. Williams’s language is enervated: a series of adjectives (“the reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy”) creates suspense, making us wait for the noun that they would modify. But what we get, after an extra moment of suspense across the line-ending, is the most general imprecise word “Stuff.” It feels rather anticlimactic since we have waited for it for some time.

Williams sets up this dead landscape and dead language to enact the process of rejuvenating them in the second half of the poem. The verbless parataxis of the opening lines is animated into a complete sentence, with the first appearance of a verb in the poem:

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold familiar wind—

Now the spring, which was feared in the opening line of *The Waste Land*, enters the scene as a naked infant. The deadliness of the landscape starts to be transformed. “The cold wind” is repeated as “familiar wind,” perhaps because it is seasonal—it comes back every year, always making us expect the coming of spring. In other words, it is not meant to be menacing but anticipates renewal. Accordingly, Williams’s language becomes more alive, more precise:

Now the grass, tomorrow
The still curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
(ll. 20-24)

Williams zeros in on the specific “curl of wildcarrot leaf,” and every object is “defined,” not just in its outline, but in the Edenic sense of naming objects as if for the first time.

From here on, Williams’s syntax becomes less paratactic, now propelled by a series of verbs. One effect of this syntactic shift is that it introduces the present tense, emphasizing the now-ness of this transformative process—it is happening at the moment of the speaker describing the scene. Indeed, the final lines do not allow this moment of renewal to be over, to recede into the past:

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken
(ll. 25-28)

The repetition of “Now the grass…. now the stark dignity” insists that this is happening at the present moment, as if the present moment enacted by the first “now” is dilated and still continues into this second “now.” Moreover, Williams refuses to end this moment of “profound change” too quickly: he could have said “they grip down and awaken,” but “begin to” keeps the objects in the process of awakening. The absence of a period after the final sentence also points to the
refusal to end this visionary moment. The infinitive “to awaken” opens up the poem into the future.

The tense of Williams’s poem is the continuous present—the present that never ends and is always directed toward the future. His syntax keeps renewing itself, moving away from the deadliness of parataxis toward a more verb-oriented sentence. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot gestures toward the possibility of renewal, in the form of nostalgia, but the glimpse of such temporal redemption quickly recedes beyond his reach. In contrast, Williams preserves this hope, and rather than looking back to the past with nostalgia, he looks forward, imagining the present as a locus of possibility.

In a sense, Williams’s temporal sensibility fits well with the standard critical narrative I have sketched out in the introduction—the assumption that modernist literature is affirmative, future-oriented, embodying the spirit of “make it new.” It focuses on the modernist aspiration to transform and redeem lost time by fiat of the imagination. The temporal sensibility that Pound and Eliot register in their syntax, however, is more complex: it is far more pessimistic than Williams’s, and even Pound and Eliot differ in their tempo and temporality. It is the danger of such a grand critical narrative and the negative temporality it obscures that I have tried to illustrate throughout my dissertation.
Conclusion: Modernists’ Difficult Style and the Tempo of Reading

There is a passage in À la recherche du temps perdu that captures the longing for temporal wholeness I have identified in the critical tradition of modernist literature. Marcel recalls how his mother used to read to him sentences from a novel:

She found, to attach them in the necessary tone, the warm inflection that preexists them and that dictated them, but that the words do not indicate; with this inflection she softened as she went along any crudeness in the tenses of the verbs, gave the imperfect and the past historic the sweetness that lies in goodness, the melancholy that lies in tenderness, directed the sentence that was ending toward the one that was about to begin, sometimes hurrying, sometimes slowing down the pace of the syllables so as to bring them, though their quantities were different, into one uniform rhythm, she breathed into this very common prose, a sort of continuous emotional life. (43 in Lydia Davis’s translation)

Just as spatial reading imposes order and wholeness, masking the stylistic disjunction of modernist literature, this mother’s voice soothes the rough textual edges of the novel she is reading out loud, connecting one sentence to the next in “one uniform rhythm.” As we have seen, the modernist writers I have examined often disrupt this expectation of textual and temporal continuity through stylistic excess. The stylistic difficulty of modernist literature has encouraged readers to adopt spatializing language and sidestep the difficulty itself by making the disjunctive surface of a work like The Waves more coherent than it actually is, filling in the gap between one sentence and the next.

I have also been arguing that this is more than a stylistic issue, for spatializing language has obscured the negative temporality of modernist literature, which has often been understood
as positive, affirmative, and committed to the idea that the present is new and radically different from the past in a progressive sense. All writers I have focused on share the awareness that such a positive view of the present as the locus of forward-looking energy cannot be sustained, for any special, empowered moment has to fade as soon as it comes into being. Moreover, behind this pessimistic notion of the present, there is a strain of anti-humanism that recurs in modernist literature. Going back to Proust’s passage, it is mother’s voice—her “sweetness,” “goodness,” tenderness,” the voice of a living human—that gives the novel its temporal continuity. In these modernist writers, the human presence that assures temporal continuity and order is diminished.

The disconcerting nature of such anti-humanist values as anti-progressivism, dehumanization, and weakened subjectivity is registered by the disorienting effect of stylistic excess in modernist literature. In Woolf, some sentences deviate from the narrative, opening up an alternative figurative temporality in which what is impossible within the confines of narrative is made possible. For example, the memory of Clarissa Dalloway as a young woman is compared to a diver, then to an unaging pearl, as if Woolf’s figurative language tries to reverse the passage of time. But whenever she makes this stylistic deviation and gestures toward the possibility of temporal redemption, she lets it fade toward the end of a sentence or in the next sentence—it cannot be sustained. What Woolf calls the “horrid transition,” from the narrative past to the figurative present and then back to the past, emphasizes the pathos that such a possibility is not available to characters in her novels.

Barnes’s sentences start where Woolf’s sentences end: they already start with temporal diminution, unable to harbor any hope for such temporal renewal. Her characters are no longer endowed with personal memory, which, in Woolf, makes characters long for a better present, a better future. For Barnes, these characters belong to the past not only because they are embedded
in the narrative past, but also because they are not presented as fully fleshed-out human characters. Barnes’s sentences constantly remind us that they are not individuated human characters but historical types. This temporal and subjective diminution is registered by her artificial syntax and stereotypical language. Her poetic language, which is notorious for its density, is different from Woolf’s: while Woolf’s poetic language yearns for a better present and future, Barnes’s does not let her characters escape, even momentarily, from their narrative confines. Instead, she diminishes their status as human characters by entrenching them even deeper in the pastness of her narrative as well as history.

In the case of modernist poetry, we have also seen different degrees to which this temporal diminution has been registered by syntax. Among the poets I have looked at, Yeats most manifestly enacts the dilemma between the hope for a better time and the impossibility of maintaining it. His convoluted syntax has only been discussed as a sign of his magisterial, capacious subjectivity: the presence of a strong lyric voice assures us that, even when his sentence seems to be falling apart, it will cohere in the end. But Yeats’s difficult syntax also registers the strain, the struggle with which he speaks about the cause he once stood for: the Irish Revival, the hope that the recovery of a dying local tradition can contribute to the formation of a nation. For example, “The Fisherman” entertains this hope, only to acknowledge the difficulty of imagining the philistine present as continuous with this bygone symbol of the native culture he admired. If his syntax sounds off-tempo at times and requires a lot of effort on the reader’s part to make it cohere, to parse, it is because it embodies this temporal struggle as well as the self-conscious acknowledgment that the present cannot be rejuvenated by reconnecting itself with the past.
Yeats presents an interesting case when compared to Pound and Eliot, for the poetry of the latter goes further in the direction of temporal diminution by giving up the hope for temporal revival as well as the appearance of coherent syntax. When their poetry falls into paratactic chaos, it does not cluster around the presence of a strong subjectivity, of a living voice. Pound and Eliot were both interested in using material from the literary past, but when brought into the present moment of speaking, the voice of the past overwhelms that of the speaker, as in Canto 1 and “Gerontion,” to the point of diminishing the “now” of the speaking agent. In some of their poems, the present is no longer a locus of possibility as it was for Yeats. The Waste Land has moments in which Eliot turns to the past with the hope of rejuvenating the present, but such moments are brief and only highlight the contrast between past plentitude and present impoverishment.

What emerges from my exploration of these authors is twofold. First, my close attention to syntax is a response to the current mode of literary criticism, which tends to prioritize context to the point of diminishing the uniqueness of a literary text. As Rita Felski has noted, the predominance of historicist approaches to literature has perpetuated the division between text and context; that is, text is studied in relation to context as if context is “a kind of box or container in which individual texts are encased and held fast” (577). Context determines the meaning of a text, as if the text is a helpless prisoner caught in this inescapable box. Felski argues: “The critic probes for meanings inaccessible to authors as well as ordinary readers, and exposes the text’s complicity in social conditions that it seeks to deny or disavow. Context, as the ampler, more expansive reference point, will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself” (574).
Of course, we need both text and context for a fuller understanding of any literary work. My hope is not to dispute the importance of context but to tip the balance toward the text by introducing a new way of talking about modernists’ engagement with time. Although my study is not context-heavy but mostly stylistic, such a focused approach to syntax can supplement more context-based approaches by bringing in the notion of fluid time in Bergsonian sense, what he called “time flowing.” In discussing modernist time, critics have tended to pay exclusive attention to the management of narrative. But my understanding of syntax as temporal form gives us another way of thinking about the ways in which modernist writers engaged with time—not time as a period or historical context reconstructed from secondary reading, but more fluid, *lived* time as represented by the tempo of a sentence. If their sentences are hard to read at times and seem to deviate from narrative or the coherent voice of a speaker, it is because they are registering the strain and difficulty of representing what Yeats has called the “deluge of experience” we find in modernist literature—the experience of living in a time of change, of rupture, the temporal experience that, far from being positive and affirmative, goes beyond the control of human subjectivity.

Another implication of my syntax-based reading is that it introduces a more temporal understanding of form, which is closer to the actual practice of reading. In the same essay, Felski suggests that we should restore agency to texts as well as readers in order to address the question of why certain works of art continue to appeal to us across temporal boundaries. Rather than assuming the text to be decoded or demystified in light of historical context, Felski focuses on how works of art continue to “thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts” (584). Similarly, in his recent article “Rhythm as Coping,” Alexander Freer proposes a new understanding of “rhythm as relational to,
and not inherent in, language” (563). That is, rhythm does not exist in a text as a given but makes sense only when a reader enacts it. Moreover, each reader enacts rhythm differently, based on memory, situation, language acquisition, and many other factors that make each person different. In emphasizing rhythm as relational, as the reader’s way of “coping” or grappling with a text, Freer foregrounds the experiential aspect of reading. The word “coping” also acknowledges the difficulty involved in the experience of reading not just a modernist text in particular but any text, for “our expectations must be met to some degree—such that we can recognize patterning at all—and yet we are inevitably confronted by variation, surprise, and sometimes the sheer difficulty ofvoicing what has been written” (559).

Freer’s understanding of rhythm is similar to the way I have been reading modernist syntax. It foregrounds the experience of reading rhythm word by word as opposed to standing back and finding a metrical pattern. When we read a poem, line by line, word by word, we are not sure what comes next, but we cope with this uncertainty by using our knowledge of what has come before, trying to create a pattern, and being surprised when the next word subverts it. Freer emphasizes the experiential aspect of reading poetry by proposing “a concept of rhythm that begins with our perceptions of surprise in the face of predictability and order in the face of disorder” (560).

Such experiential reading is particularly important for reading modernist literature. Reading each sentence as an event forces us to confront a simple fact that has often been brushed aside in criticism: modernist literature is difficult to read and often stylistically excessive. My dissertation project started with the simple question of why they had to write the way they wrote, in a difficult, alienating style that does not seem to be demanded by any need for characterization or narrative. The difficult sentences I have singled out do not seem to contribute to the organic
whole of spatial form; they do not propel narrative or contribute to the creation of a single lyric voice. Such moments invite us to rethink the standard, positive account of modernist time as well as the static understanding of literary form. They testify to the fact that, for these writers, language is no longer the means to redeem time lost. For example, even when Woolf gestures toward the possibility of temporal renewal by moving from the narrative past into the figurative present, she qualifies this gesture by emphasizing the gap between the two. Time must go on beyond her control, beyond her medium. The stylistic excess of modernist writing represents the uncontrollable nature of experiential time and the failed promise of temporal redemption.
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