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“BETWEEN GLOOM AND LAUGHTER”: FEMALE LONGING, UNHAPPINESS, AND
STRUCTURES OF ABSENCE IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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BY

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ABSTRACT**“BETWEEN GLOOM AND LAUGHTER”: FEMALE LONGING, UNHAPPINESS, AND
STRUCTURES OF ABSENCE IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

BY ALLYSON ROCHE

This thesis begins by asking: How does Virginia Woolf contend with the positionality of the ignored woman within literary narratives, structures, and histories? What about the yearning, unhappy women that reside on the plot's edges of Woolf's fiction, who find themselves displaced and suspended – by their own longing– from the narratives in which they reside? In a series of readings of *Jacob's Room*, her first experimental novel but still one of her most undertheorized, I argue that while Woolf's work uncovers this absence, she refuses to patch up its damage on literary history by merely filling it, or relocating these disappearing women back into our line of sight. Instead, she asks what limitless structure might arise from the discomfort of a woman's heaving sobs. By laying out the truncated desires of the forgotten women who disappear from the novel almost as soon as they're introduced, I demonstrate the narrative potential Woolf locates in the absence found by female characters who vacillate between abandoning their unfulfilling position in the marriage plot and untethering their desire from narrative altogether. What results is an examination of what is unwritten and how women absent themselves from a fixed narrative and time through reading and sleeping. Finally, through tears and laughter, I propose an argument that finds both the productivity and loss offered by disappearance and absence. Ending with “A Woman's College from Outside,” a chapter cut from *Jacob's Room* and published as an independent short story, I argue that Woolf's reproduction of the very thing she critiques about literature, that is, this disappearance, becomes the site of queer possibility.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....5

Vanishing in Tears, Disappearing Into the Air..... 11

Conclusion..... 64

Bibliography..... 68

Glory for a woman is the dazzling mourning of happiness. – Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

And when the body finally starts to let go, let it all go at once. Not piece by piece, but like a whole bucket of stars, dumped into the universe. Watch it go. Goodbye, small hands. Goodbye, small heart. Goodbye, small head. – Sleater-Kinney, “Get Up.”

There was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, ‘Consume me.’

– Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

They made themselves air, into which they vanished. – William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

So she slept and dreamed, and smiled in her sleep, and once threw out her arm to feel for something which was not there, dreaming still. – Katherine Mansfield, “The Tiredness of Rosabel.”

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning stages of this project, I set out with the intention of writing about young women reading in the work of Virginia Woolf, but as my research progressed, I found myself cataloging scenes of women *not* reading, failing to read, departing from their chosen novels and poetry by way of distraction or boredom, channeling their yearning into “little excursions” to their windows or into the landscape.¹ These scenes of reading then gave way to an argument about reading that Woolf locates in a whole set of circumstances that allow women out of the text. The question then becomes about female positionality within literary narratives, structures, and histories, and how their longing pulls them to the plot’s edges, dwindling on the perimeter until they disappear into absence. What about these yearning women that reside on plot’s edges, particularly in Woolf’s fiction, who find themselves displaced and suspended – by their own desire – from the narratives in which they reside?

This thesis focuses on Woolf’s first experimental novel, *Jacob’s Room* (1922), which comes as a surprise, given its status as one of the more undertheorized and less popular of her works. *Jacob’s Room* finds itself mostly absent from the typical focuses of discourse in Woolf studies,² but it remains essential to my inquiry of the minoritarian status and positionality of female characters as being central to Woolf’s politics. The novel follows Jacob, its titular character, from childhood, through his college years at Cambridge, and leaves us with an image of his mother carrying his shoes after he dies in war, though the depictions of the events of his death remain unwritten. *Jacob’s Room* is Jacob’s story, yet Woolf introduces dozens of peripheral

¹ I take the quoted phrase from a 1918 diary entry in which Virginia Woolf describes the effect that reading Lord Byron had upon her: he “drives [her] to little excursions over the surrounding landscape or room in the middle of [her] reading.” (Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 1: 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 181).

² What has been written on *Jacob’s Room* tends to focus on Jacob – Jacob as an elusive character, as a representation of war, or as a reflection of Woolf’s brother Thoby Stephen, who died in 1906. Vara Neverow catalogs the changes of critical focus on the novel throughout the century. See: Vara Neverow, “The Evolving Reception of *Jacob’s Room* over the Decades of a Century,” *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 99 (Spring/Summer 2022): 51-53.

characters that are loosely linked – sometimes never connected at all – to Jacob, most of whom are women. Largely dismissed as a failure for its elusive subject and inconsistent presence of its narrator who seems to vanish somewhere along the way, Woolf’s first venture into experimenting with the novel form gets overlooked and overshadowed by her subsequent, more successful attempts with experimentation, like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1928). As a result, its female characters also get dismissed as failures.³ These longing, unhappy women are all over Woolf’s fiction, disappearing into the margins of the text, and in the critical discussions about these novels, they remain stilted in that absence – remaining absent too from these discourses. My goal is not to simply shift the spotlight away from Jacob and to these women to see if they can withstand and warrant the same kind of rigorous critique and analysis that Jacob receives, but instead, I consider their marginal status alongside their susceptibility to disappearance – not in spite of it. These frustrated women whose narratives are truncated or abandoned function almost as stepping stones for the narrator’s progression through Jacob’s story. They are left behind in their unhappiness, in their yearning. Where does this yearning go when it fails to firmly attach itself to narrative?

I locate the focus of this exploration inside the emergence of her experimental form, not because it fails, but because it is her first attempt at working through her frustration with the Edwardian novelistic model, and particularly because her discovery of this new form emerges

³ Many critics have taken the female characters at face value, unfairly trusting and adopting both Jacob’s and the narrator’s opinions of them. For example, Sara Crangle claims the boredom that Florinda – who Jacob calls “brainless” – encounters while reading Shelley must reflect Woolf’s own “attitudes” that “annoying people are just boring,” suggesting that Woolf “tendentiously writes” Jacob as a “more laudable figure,” compared to Florinda, the “adorable floozy.” (See: Sara Crangle, “The Time Being: On Woolf and Boredom,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 217.) While calling her “annoying” dismisses her complexity, it more importantly reveals a pattern of the refusal to engage with the inexplicability of such female characters, simply writing their perplexities off as Woolf’s own failure to properly characterize them. Susan C. Harris writes that the “contempt for” Florinda “comes through to the reader so blatantly that it is hard not to assume that Woolf herself is behind” the ridicule of the “brainless” Florinda. See: Susan C. Harris, “The Ethics of Indecency: Censorship, Sexuality, and the Voice of the Academy in the Narration of *Jacob’s Room*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 4 (1997): 423.

out of female unhappiness. The novel warrants this kind of attention and critical analysis particularly for the kinds of questions about Woolf's work that I want to ask – about unhappiness and longing and its direct correspondence with the peripheral positionality of women in fiction, how it leads to a certain kind of disappearance and absence when they are relegated to the unimagined spaces outside the narrative's boundaries. I'm interested in the structures of absence that Woolf points at routinely, in *A Room of One's Own* for example, and I realized that I wanted to examine what Woolf *does* with these absences after pointing to them – she creates structures from and of these absences, not simply filling them but producing them. As Woolf works out a theory of character that will account for these disappearing women, she also tries to figure out a “new form” for the novel, the vision of which is also refracted through the language of elusivity; it anticipates an arrival upon something unnamed, a kind of liberation that gives way to form and a kind of form that gives way to liberation. It is here that Woolf hopes to “find room for so much,” as she writes in her diary; she'll find “a gaiety — an inconsequence — a light spirited stepping at [her] sweet will.”⁴

Virginia Woolf, writing this diary entry the day after her thirty-eighth birthday, declares her arrival upon “a new form for a novel,” where “one thing should open out of another – as in *An Unwritten Novel*.”⁵ Emerging from the experimentation explored in her short story, “*An Unwritten Novel*” (1921), here Woolf imagines the “immense possibilities in the form [she] hit upon,” whose conception made her feel “a great deal happier” than she had felt just the day before – not “happy,” that is, but “happier.”⁶ Woolf gauges the relationship of her happiness placing it along her life's timeline, the birthday milestone spurring in her the reflection that now,

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

she was “happier than [she] was at 28.” It is not the passage of time that draws her closer to happiness, but her arrival upon a new structure, a new literary mode full of possibility and opportunity that does. And where do all the “possibilities” of this new form come from? Or, rather, from what do they “open out of,” as Woolf puts it. The very first sentence of the short story, unlike her diary entry, takes female *unhappiness* as its subject, asserting it as the central “thing” that another “thing” will “open out of”: “Such an expression of unhappiness was enough by itself to make one’s eyes slide above the paper’s edge to the poor woman’s face – insignificant without that look, almost a symbol of human destiny with it.”⁷ It is precisely because this woman on the train – who “looked the most unhappy woman in the world” – does not “play the game” and refuses to “conceal” her discontent that the scene *opens*, and the story, which follows the narrator’s projections about what this woman’s life might look like, exists.⁸ The speculation of the story is occasioned by female unhappiness, out of which her new form emerges. This form eventually finds its way from short story to *Jacob’s Room*, her first experimental novel.

But as Woolf admits elsewhere, “such an expression of unhappiness” like that woman’s, is not, in fact, “enough” to capture everyone’s focus. For some, particularly Arnold Bennett, who criticizes *Jacob’s Room* because its “characters do not vitally survive in the mind,” it does not matter how “overwhelming” an impression the “suffering” woman makes.⁹ It does not matter that her unhappiness, while sitting in the corner opposite, “came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning.”¹⁰ These descriptions, while similar to those found in “An Unwritten Novel,” actually belong to Woolf’s resurrection of the mysterious and unhappy woman-on-a-train figure,

⁷ Virginia Woolf, “An Unwritten Novel,” in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 10.

⁹ Arnold Bennett, “Is the Novel Decaying?” *Cassell’s Weekly* (London, England), March 28, 1923, 47; Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, The Hogarth Essays 1 (London, England: Hogarth Press, 1924), 1; 8, 6.

¹⁰ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett...” 8.

Mrs. Brown, who appears in the rejoinder to Bennett's criticism, Woolf's essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). It does not matter to Arnold Bennett how miserable Mrs. Brown might be because "Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner"; never paid attention to the old woman on the margins.¹¹ The women of *Jacob's Room* do not survive in his mind because they merely "dab their eyes," like Mrs. Brown. They have looks "of suffering, of apprehension," like Mrs. Brown. They cry in the corners of *Jacob's Room* and they disappear in their tears. Readers like Bennett – and, in fact, as Woolf argues, all of the Edwardian writers, for they too have not "so much as looked at her" – treat these characters as Mrs. Brown's acquaintance, Mr. Smith, treats her in Woolf's essay: she cries, and he talks "a little louder, a little angrily," as if her crying "got on his nerves," pushing him to address her in a "bullying, menacing way, as if he would not stand any more nonsense" – after which, he exits the train and leaves her behind. If the authors of the canon refuse to recognize the miserable old woman across the way, this woman does not have a place, even on the margins, in the literary world. Woolf's way of writing these women into *Jacob's Room*, on the other hand, insists that this susceptibility to disappearance, the ever present threat of absence, which leaves them in painful, unhappy longing, lodges them inside a tension between nothingness and endless narrative possibility.

It would seem, from the title alone, that *Jacob's Room* would focus on Jacob as a character – and it does.¹² But, like a Russian Doll, *Jacob's Room* finds its structure, or its

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The overwhelming focus of the majority of criticism on *Jacob's Room* revolves around either Jacob as the novel's subject or his representational relationship to war. For more on Jacob as protagonist, see: Edward L. Bishop, "The Subject in *Jacob's Room*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 147-175. Vincent Sherry insists that examining how the narrator's "technique of omission intersects with references to the war" is crucial to understanding the "place of *Jacob's Room* in the political" and "literary history." See: Vincent Sherry, "*Jacob's Room*: Occasions of War, Representations of History," in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 68. Adolfe Haberer suggests that Jacob is "elusive" throughout, but it is in his unmentioned death that he "becomes radically absent." See: Adolfe Haberer, "Virginia Woolf's Non-Hero: 'My Name Is Jacob. Catch Me If You Can,'" in *A Journey through Knowledge: Festschrift in Honour of Hortensia Pârlog*, ed. Luminița Frențiu and Loredana Pungă (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 66.

openings, through the opening up of its female characters: as a yearning woman disappears from the narrative, another one who similarly – and solitarily – bargains with her own happiness, appears. Dozens of female characters reside on the periphery. Because they displace focus from Jacob’s arc, redirecting it to women’s private negotiations with happiness, these characters initially appear in the novel’s structure as sites of tension. Their narrative function vacillates between being either a series of interludes, or instead, curtailed stories of female longing and displacement. Susan Stewart, in describing a version of this tension, writes that the narratorial shift into “detailed description” causes us to “see the possibility of using detail to digress, to inscribe a circle around an object not to divulge it.”¹³ Woolf wrote in her diary that she wanted to “enclose everything,” declaring that this “approach will be entirely different”; it will have “no scaffolding, scarcely a brick to be seen.”¹⁴ By foreclosing upon the architectural structures of “scaffolding” and “brick” that would otherwise house the story, her reconfiguration of the novelistic form refuses the upward, progressive orientation whose chapters accumulate like stratified levels of a building. Instead, Woolf calls for a story that unfurls and uncovers rather than builds. These “openings” suggest a set of linkages, the forging of a circuitous path as plot. The literary form shifts its emphasis from containment to release, allowing her to “find room for so much” in what is inconsequential to Jacob’s *bildungsroman*.¹⁵

In what follows, I am not concerned, then, with what Woolf leaves unknowable about Jacob; I am interested in how she *keeps* it unknown – what allows the estrangement to happen, where the attention shifts and what the tension produces not for Jacob, but for the women on the edges, the women Woolf’s narrator uses to form this “circle.” As the women’s stories open out of

¹³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 30.

¹⁴ Woolf, *Diary Vol. II*, 13-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

one another, the points of access are found at the curtailment of their desires. These tertiary female characters function as the “digressions” that Stewart says “hold the reader in suspension, or annoyance, for it presents the possibility of never getting back, of remaining forever within the detour.”¹⁶ While these “detours” are mostly quick and inconclusive, this repeated movement – away from Jacob and to a woman – works both to establish and resist the boundaries that frame the presumptive central plot.¹⁷ They frustrate the “reader’s view” of Jacob, and – as many of these women disappear from the novel as soon as they’re introduced – they “[toy] with the hierarchy of narrative events. What counts and what doesn’t count must be sorted.”¹⁸ While Woolf’s new form relies on the linkages of these women, the “circle” they form would not exist without Jacob, since their appearances and connections are contingent on him. Because the structure insists on meandering through the lives of longing women on the plot’s edges, the progression of the overarching narrative depends on these women cutting short the explorations of their desires; it depends on their disappearance from the narrative. *Jacob’s Room* is, after all, Jacob’s story; the women are housed inside a narrative that is not their own.

DISAPPEARING IN TEARS, VANISHING INTO AIR

Jacob’s Room begins with the tears of female unhappiness. Opening up and opening out of a woman’s unexplained discontent, “some buried discomfort” of which Mrs. Flanders was “aware all the time in the depths of her mind,” the novel begins as her tears destabilize her world

¹⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 30.

¹⁷ Even in discussions about the novel’s insistence on absence, Jacob has remained the concern. Edward L. Bishop argues that “we do not know him,” reminding us that he is “first denominated as an absence” when Mrs. Flanders calls after him (Edward L. Bishop, “The Subject in ‘Jacob’s Room,’” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 149,159; Beryl Pong has suggested that “Jacob’s distance and inaccessibility to the reader” offers the “overall effect” of “negative space or absent presence, with the novel giving shape and form to the lack that death both represents and entails” (Beryl Pong, “War and Peace,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Fernald (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2021), 446).

¹⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, 30.

and fracture her well-behaved sentences.¹⁹ They melt her view into unsteady objects that “quiver” and “bend”; they “dissolve” the grammatical guard rails in her “many-paged” letters. This physical residue of unhappiness, these tears, produce a kind of visual and syntactical indiscernibility that smudges distinction and threatens complete erasure. Mrs. Flanders’s first sentence, which doubles as the novel’s, reflects the movement to and from female unhappiness that is necessary for the novel’s unraveling: “of course,” Mrs. Flanders writes, “there was nothing for it but to leave” (*JR* 5). In a lecture on the bodily limits of laughter and tears, Judith Butler notes that “one breaks out laughing, and one breaks into tears,” and asks of crying’s orientation, “from what” is one “breaking” and “in what direction?”²⁰ In the case of *Jacob’s Room*, breaking into tears means breaking from the bounds of measured, standardized expression. When she cries, her pen freezes; the “ink dissolve[s] the full stop.” When she winks her tears away, “she scribble[s], ignoring the full stop” (*JR* 5). Though the onset of her crying left a “horrid blot” that “spread” across the letter page, her tears pose to her the possibility of erasing distinction, exceeding the bounds and pummeling through barriers. Butler proposes that the “first person ‘I’” is “overwhelmed by its own expression” when crying, and while this “I” – Mrs. Flanders in her letter writing – is “still the one who is...crying” this “‘I’ is becoming undone physically.”²¹ The breath and ability to speak “keeps running away on its own,” and one “comes right up against an edge – the physical limit to life itself.”²² The structure of *Jacob’s Room* is predicated not only on female unhappiness, but on the possibility that its expression poses for these unhappy women, and how they face this possibility.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* (London, England: Hogarth Press, 1922; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), 5-8. Henceforth, citations will appear in the body of the text as *JR*.

²⁰ Judith Butler, “Out of Breath: Laughing, Crying at the Body’s Limit,” lecture presented at Encuentro at the Hemispheric Institute, CDMX, Mexico, June 13, 2019, Hemispheric Institute, last modified August 5, 2019, accessed March 11, 2023,

<https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/encuentro-2019-keynote-lectures/item/3084-keynote-lectures-004.html>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Crying cements what becomes the catalyst of the novel's movement; it is the physical response of "crying" that Butler argues "take[s] leave from a situation to which [it] also respond[s]." Like Butler's description of crying, Mrs. Flanders' tears allow the narrator, and readers, to "take leave" of Mrs. Flanders and briefly move to another housewife, Mrs. Jarvis, but only through and by the tears. The effect of the tears undoes Mrs. Flanders' world as they make "all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves" while also making "Mrs Jarvis, the rector's wife, think at church...that marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning a few golden straws, lonely, unprotected, poor creatures" (*JR* 5-6). In order to access Mrs. Jarvis's dismal daydreams, we needed Betty Flanders's sorrow.

Later on in the novel, we are taken directly to a scene of Jarvis's unhappiness, when she decides to "walk on alone," for she "walked on the moor when she was unhappy" (*JR* 24). Betty Flanders is the widow, but — as she later she declares that she "had not opened the orchard gate and gone out on Dods Hill after dinner" in "years" — it's Mrs. Jarvis who embodies the figure of the widow as she herself defines it — jaunting through the fields, alone (*JR* 124). She roves across the evening landscape, settling down to read some poetry in the "saucer-shaped hollow," even "though she always meant to go to a more distant ridge" (*JR* 24). The unhappy Mrs. Jarvis's repeated curtailment of desire registers her greater internal conflict as a confrontation of having lived a life that followed the marriage plot and, essentially, ends after marriage. Writing about *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sara Ahmed suggests that all of Woolf's women imagine their "own futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course."²³ "If happiness is what allows us to reach certain points," Ahmed writes, then eventually, "the point of reaching these points seems to be a certain disappearance, a loss of possibility, a certain failure to make use of the body's capacities, to find out what it is that her body can do" because "to become conscious of possibility can

²³ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 71.

involve mourning for its loss.” Following Ahmed’s timeline, if Mrs. Jarvis were to push past her limits and finally reach that farther ridge where she could encounter the idea of possibility, her liberation would be occluded by grief. Woolf’s narrator plays out the hypothetical, describing Mrs. Jarvis as “just the sort of woman... to lose her faith upon the moors” and “leave her husband” (*JR* 24).

If her unhappiness creates the conditions that allow for the roving of her body and her mind, and if her desire for that farther ridge persists, perhaps as a distant site of possible contentment, why does she stop herself, time and time again? Mrs. Jarvis reasons, while looking out at the horizon, that “she was not very unhappy, and seeing that she was forty-five, never perhaps would be very unhappy, desperately unhappy, that is, and leave her husband and ruin a good man’s career, as she sometimes threatened” (*JR* 24-25). Though she denies being unhappy three times consecutively, it’s her unhappiness that allows her to ritualize the act of walking on the moors. This denial becomes more about establishing a threshold of unhappiness, distinguishing between being “unhappy” and being “very” or “desperately unhappy” (*JR* 24-25). This is predicated on the assumption that desperate unhappiness unquestionably necessitates severance from its causes. Her rationalization fails to consider that she has already been motivated to act – she’s trekking across the countryside as a result of it. This unhappiness drives her physically away and into the landscape, trapping her into repetition.

I tend to find Mrs. Jarvis hovering over all the women that succeed her, haunting each one that follows, as if her inconclusive and suspended longing lingers past herself and her scene in its directionlessness. Mrs. Jarvis, who thinks to herself, “if only someone could give me...if I could give someone...” does “not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it to her” (*JR* 25). The ellipsis, an unspoken cue, becomes the grammatical equivalent to her untapped

ridge. In the silence it imposes, a space of possibility arrives; the sentence can go anywhere, and so can her desire. But instead of jumping into that unknown silence, that undetermined possibility, she remains stuck inside those dots, vaguely gesturing out towards something different but never reaching for it.²⁴ These unfinished, undetermined desires appear across all of Woolf's fiction, and even characters like Kitty in her later novel, *The Years* (1937), cannot reach a conclusion in the novel's last few pages: "She wanted something – some finish, some fillip – what, she did not know."²⁵ Mrs. Jarvis occupies a paradox that embraces the conditions of unhappiness, while resisting the extremity of unhappiness – refusing to cross the threshold and reach the untapped ridge of possibility.

This threshold arrives by way of mediated desire; women's own desire, if followed and explored, threatens to displace them outside their narrative in two ways – women's desire upsets the structure of the literary narrative in which they exist, and it doesn't fit in the marriage plot narrative their lives are expected to follow. Lauren Berlant outlines this narrative, writing that "even though the shapes desire takes can be infinite, one plot dominates scenes of proper fantasy and expectation. It is a plot in which the patterns of infantile desire develop into a love plot that will be sutured by the institutions of intimacy and the fantasy of familial continuity."²⁶ This traditional narrative advertises the social structure of the well-behaved family as a safeguard against the dangers of falling into complete social exclusion, insisting that the only way to appropriately channel desire, for a woman, is to route it into the pursuit of marriage and children.

The women in *Jacob's Room* dream of these futures, measuring Jacob by fantasy. Clara Durrant, for instance, writes in her diary: "I like Jacob Flanders' (*JR* 67). 'He is so unworldly.

²⁴ Bradley Bowers argues in a similar vein that Woolf's "use of an ellipsis means that something is simultaneously there and not there." See: Bradley Bowers, "The Meaning of Ellipsis," *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 83 (Spring 2013): 26.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 425.

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Santa Barbara, CA: punctum books, 2012), 44.

He gives himself no airs, and one can say what one likes to him, though he's frightening because...". But as the expression of her desire grows, Clara is cut short by the page and by Woolf's ellipsis. She's left unable to explain why Jacob is "frightening" because "Mr. Letts allows little space in his shilling diaries." Emphasis shifts from Clara as determining the contents of her diary to the brand that produced it, Letts of London. As soon as she risks transgressing the book's rules, her limitations arrest her. She chides herself like a mother scolding her child to *control yourself*, reminding her that *this is not how I raised you* – "not one to encroach upon Wednesday." In order to maintain the structure and sequence that dominates her life, she must not allow her desire to spill over into Wednesday, and in identifying herself by and tying her womanhood to her ability to enclose herself within the structure she's been given, her identity and womanhood hinge on this act of containment. The exclamatory punctuation, and her repeated "no, no, no," elevates this reminder to a scolding affirmation, the consequence of failing to contain her expression would mean estranging herself from the markers of womanhood. After all, she was the "humblest, most candid of women!" (JR 67). Humble women are women who know their place, and Clara burnishes her identity with a humble transparency, a kind of honest and candid sincerity that presents her as one of these women who would never dare transgress.

Clara's criticism of Jacob as "unworldly" and "frightening" endangers her progress towards marriage; her resistance towards him presents a potential deviation from the marriage plot. As Clara pulls back, Woolf defers Clara's autonomy over her own expression to the limitations of calendrical time. Clara has situated the exploration of her desire in a space owned and organized by the standard, and her repetitive admonitions cast this deferral of power as a reminder that she is constantly at the mercy of clock-time, of standard expectation and order. Inside the dominant structure – inside Mr. Letts's structure – there is neither room for her desire

nor time; his terms dictate her expression. In encroaching upon Wednesday, she'd forfeit her role in her life's narrative path as well as her function in the narrative structure of *Jacob's Room*. Nonetheless, she "wished the moment to continue for ever precisely as it was that July morning" (*JR* 67). If the moment could continue, Clara would be suspended from sequence, from time, and subsequently, from narrative, and she'd continue to write in her diary without the threat of Wednesday's approach. But as she contains her desire to write, she recedes, providing the point at which the meandering narrative resumes its focus back on Jacob. Because "moments don't" continue, Woolf shifts immediately, to the next – to Jacob's story – where "now Jacob was telling a story." Like Mrs. Jarvis, when Clara pulls herself back, her sentence peters out, her expression lacks conclusion, her feelings lose definition. Women like Clara threaten to distract, but in cutting themselves short from their own emotional explorations, they facilitate the story's transitions like stepping stones, allowing Jacob's plot to progress, and hers to remain unwritten in the ellipses, at the margins.

Desire that pours out, however, is disruptive, and the fear of the consequences of this transgression keeps women from reaching a defining conclusion to their curiosities. If Clara did, in fact, allow her feelings and thoughts to "encroach upon Wednesday," a "catastrophe" would "ensue" (*JR* 99). The minor character must stay contained, and yet later Woolf gives us Miss Marchmont, who sits next to Jacob at the British Museum Reading Room and whose books "fall into Jacob's compartment" (*JR* 99). This, then, is her own "little catastrophe." Miss Marchmont's meandering intellectual desires, represented by and found in books, spill over the sides, disrupting those of her masculine counterpart. While Clara identifies herself by resisting the catastrophe of disruption, Miss Marchmont is associated with these disruptions, as "such things happened" to her. Such an assertion leaves us to imagine Miss Marchmont's passions,

ricocheting between “Mr. Asquith’s Irish Policy” and “Shakespeare,” as making her clumsy, her disorganization regularly unsettling others, her personal interests always posing the threat of disturbance to those in the same room. She, like Clara and Mrs. Jarvis, is unable to reach a conclusion, or even know where she is going. What, after all, “was she seeking through millions of pages”? It was “sometimes one thing, sometimes another, to confirm her philosophy that colour is sound – or, perhaps, it has something to do with music. She could never quite say, though it was not for lack of trying.” Jacob, unlike Miss Marchmont, arrives at the library with a clear plan and the university to structure and guide his intellectual pursuits: he copies out “a whole passage from Marlowe” (*JR* 100). Miss Marchmont’s purpose, on the other hand, ricochets and remains unclear. Could she not just say that “color is sound”? No, she fails to come to a conclusion, and, in fact, she fails to conclude why she’s at the library in the first place. She cannot conclude *what* it is that she seeks, *why* she turns to books, why she *seeks* in the first place, why the knowledge of color and sound is the thing she wants. All the knowledge is available, but reaching it becomes an impossibility. Because her direction and purpose are fungible, she can study anything – the books can take her anywhere. But there is no shape, like Jacob’s university, that can help circuit routeless female desire. Like color, sound, and music, her desire remains elusive and intangible. Unable to specify her end goal and where the quest might get her, even if she does find an answer, there is no conclusion or consolation offered by the written word. It’s too much. It topples over into Jacob’s space.

The act of containing desire becomes about the tethering of it. As it prompts existential questions of purpose, Miss Marchmont’s longing shifts to something concrete, identifiable, and most importantly, acquirable, a wanting that tethers her back to the domestic sphere: “‘One does want one’s tea,’ said Miss Marchmont” (*JR* 100). The satisfaction of a determined desire elicits

its repetition: “Miss Marchmont wanted her tea” and “having done her service, she hobbled off to tea” (*JR* 102). Like Clara, Miss Marchmont curtails the exploration of her desire before reaching a conclusion, conveniently discarding her intellectual inquiries and opting for tea right at the library’s closing time. Clara and Miss Marchmont ultimately tether their exploration of their desires to dominant sequence and narrative, because if it deviates, it becomes a “catastrophe” through its disruption.

Desire wants to be followed. It meanders and wants these women to wander along with it, but in honoring the pull of this desire, they might forfeit their role in the marriage plot, thus upsetting the expectations of convention. The marriage plot has regularly claimed contained female longing.²⁷ We might think of *Jane Eyre*, where the pull of desire coalesces with the marriage plot itself, and the yearning is a yearning to keep these two bound tightly together. That narrative offers grounding and direction for their longing. But the yearning of the women in Woolf’s work is incommensurable with this plot, and in fact, pull away from it. Clara, for example, will not reconcile herself to a life spent like Mrs. Jarvis, in restrained unsatisfying yearning. When a man named Edwin Mallet writes a poem for her in which he calls her “Chloe” instead of Clara, she “laughed” at the “ridiculous young man!” (*JR* 80). But on the “rainy morning” that “Edwin Mallet laid his life at her feet she ran out of the room and hid herself in her bedroom,” and Clara’s brother, Timothy, residing in the room “below could not get on with his work on account of her sobs” (*JR* 80). The prospect of marriage stultifies Clara.²⁸ Edwin’s life, laid upon her feet, is too heavy, too crushing. She escapes, as if his life threatens to pin her

²⁷ For more on desire and the marriage plot, see: Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, reprint ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²⁸ Clara is one of the many female characters in Woolf’s work that buckles under the pressure of the marriage plot. Woolf herself endured a massive nervous breakdown after accepting Leonard Woolf’s engagement in 1912, after agonizing over the decision for months. Whether Woolf’s characters agree to marriage – Mrs. Dalloway and *To the Lighthouse*’s Prue Ramsay – or if they resist, like Lily Briscoe, marriage is never a coveted goal that delivers on its reparative promises of happiness. Prue, for example, lives out her mother’s fantasy of marriage and pregnancy, unlike Lily who fiercely resists Mrs. Ramsay’s advice, only to then die in childbirth.

down at her feet, forcing her into rootedness and stuckness. Her desire to avoid the marriage plot not only leaves her to meander in sadness, but her unhappiness vehemently interrupts the progression of the narratives surrounding her. Crying women are interrupting women. Her sobs disrupt the man's story – Timothy's work – despite the sound of the morning rain. The rain does not drown out and muffle her sobs; her tears do not mingle and coalesce with the sky's crying. Her sobs fight against the sky's, and hers reverberate louder, emerge sharper and cannot be dismissed into what is natural and expected of even the dreary clouds.

These women, either directly or indirectly, turn away from the narrative that would culminate in marriage, looking for an alternative course on which to fix their longing. Other young women in Woolf's work burst into tears in moments when men consider and propose romance and marriage. In a party scene in *The Voyage Out*, St. John Hirst tells Rachel that he would like to "lend [her] books" as he says goodbye.²⁹ What could have been the start of a romantic courtship made Rachel feel "surrounded" by hostility, so much so that she abandons the scene of the party. As she "pushed" the window open, and "stepped out into the garden," her eyes, like Clara's, "swam with tears of rage." "Tears" also "came into" Evelyn's "eyes" when she realized that Hewett was flirting with her, to which she exclaimed that she was "not trying to flirt with [him]." Tears again "ran down" her "face" when she complains to Rachel that she has "never met a man that was fit to compare with a woman!"³⁰ Clara, like Evelyn, wishes to preemptively stop the panic that a man's love, or even simply romantic interest, will inflict; talking with Jacob about leaves and grapes, Clara thinks "that he must not say that he loved her. No, no, no." (*JR* 59). Even though their messy, spilling tears and their familiarity with this kind

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, Modern Library Trade Paperback Edition. ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2021), 157.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 257; Both Rachel and the novel share a frustration with the traditional marriage plot, and this has been a focus for many critics. For instance, see: Jane de Gay, "From Woman Reader to Woman Writer: The Voyage Out," in *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 19-43.

of repeated sobbing would suggest that these women are determined to resist a life that would inhibit their freedom and desire, these tears, and the stress that their disruptions cause, are exhausting. Judith Butler suggests that when the “body breaks open or breaks into involuntary heaving, catching its breath,” it becomes “intimate with the threat of no longer being able to breathe.”³¹ Breaking into tears indicates that “some form of functional life has broken down” and the “body inserts itself as a disturbance in that functioning”; crying is “miming, without full control, that reaction of being imperiled.”³² To continuously acquaint yourself with crisis and catastrophe, to respond to mundane conversations with an involuntary reaction that nears “the condition of physical emergency,” as Butler describes, is debilitating. Though Butler suggests that “there is no power to secure autonomy from emotion,” that doesn’t mean you can’t guilt and scold yourself into changing. Clara, even after declaring that she could “never marry a man with a nose like that,” about Richard Bonamy, mentally reprimands herself for being “too severe” after her mother tells her that her remark is “nonsense.” “For Clara, losing all vivacity, tore up her dance programme and threw it in the fender” (*JR* 80). Amongst their crying, an alternative narrative to the marriage plot fails to emerge, and the women, wiping away their tears, engage in push-pull negotiations with their desires, establishing a threshold and refusing to surpass it.

In order to tether their longing, to rein it in, they must establish a personal threshold in which they restrict their minds as well as their bodies from the threatening possibilities of traveling beyond their circumstances. Take Mrs. Pascoe, for instance. After her friend, Mrs. Durrant, and her nephew visited her cottage, Mrs. Pascoe “stood at the gate looking after them; stood at the gate till the trap was round the corner; stood at the gate looking now to the right, now to the left; then went back to her cottage” (*JR* 52). While the gate keeps her from roaming

³¹ Butler, “Out of Breath,” lecture, Hemispheric Institute.

³² *Ibid.*

the moors, it also thwarts her mind's wanderings. A hindered thought hinders desire, repressing potential dissatisfaction, keeping desire from exceeding its plotted course. Like the repetition of Mrs. Marchmont's tangible, domestic desire – “tea” – the narrator repeats Mrs. Pascoe's tethered position – “stood at the gate” – three times. The repetition of the barrier reinforces it, extending its function as a site of restriction from the physical to the mental. The narrator's focus shifts to Mrs. Pascoe's movements, mechanically and methodically revealed as if they were stage directions, without granting us any access to her interiority. Locked away, we stand on the other side of the gate, of her mind, with her thoughts and feelings no longer reachable. The gate delivers on an earlier attempt to cease her thoughts from tumbling into hypotheticals and possibilities, where Mrs. Pascoe “pored long over Lady Cynthia's wedding at the Abbey,” as Mrs. Pascoe “would have liked to ride in a carriage with springs” (*JR* 51). The wish for a carriage ride prompts her to remind herself of her reality, how “all night” she hears “the grinding of the Atlantic upon the rocks instead of hansom cabs and footmen whistling for motor-cars...so she may have dreamed” (*JR* 51). Woolf's narrator curbs another thought resembling an alternative possibility with the use of an ellipsis, an orthographical cue reflecting Pascoe's strict mental and emotional discipline. It's the carriage ride that she desires most from her curtailed and brief daydream of city life – it's the carriage that offers her imagination the fodder for her daydream – and as she watches Mrs. Durrant's carriage roll down the street, there is no acknowledgement of it, as if ignoring her desire would erase her desire and obliterate the potential acknowledgement of her own dissatisfaction.

Woolf's elliptical movement sustains *Jacob's Room*, and so I too, find myself looping backwards. Upon arriving at Mrs. Durrant's carriage, I'm pulled back into the carriages of “An Unwritten Novel” and the train car in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which sounds alongside

Durrant's. Her carriage joins a parade of Woolf's vehicles that are fleeting and dissipating spaces of narrative potential. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf clarifies that the carriage "is traveling not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English Literature to the next" and emphasizes how Mrs. Brown often disappears along with it.³³ In "An Unwritten Novel," the narrator acknowledges the vacillation between narrative dissipation and emergence, as she reflects that she has "hidden" the commercial travellers "all this time in the hope that somehow they'd disappear, or better still emerge, as indeed they must, if the story's to go on gathering richness and rotundity, destiny and tragedy, as stories should, rolling along with it two, if not three, commercial travellers."³⁴ When Mrs. Pascoe barely acknowledges the carriage, even her desire for a carriage initially imprinted "hansom" daydreams upon her mind, she ignores possibility and relinquishes narratives that she might actually desire.

The intangibility of daydreams and optative possibilities pose a dangerous threat to her faith in the stability of her life and the determination to remain inside and of the marriage plot's expectations. In sublimating and repressing her thoughts and emotions, and even possible desires, she turns to their opposite – the tangible, the immobile. Mrs. Pascoe's "mind...adhered to its solitary patch," tethering her mind to the physical location of domesticity (*JR* 51). If, as Ahmed writes, "the point of reaching these points seems to be a certain disappearance," Pascoe "prize[s] mats, china, mugs, and photographs" and clings to material objects as an antidote against fading into absence (*JR* 50-51).³⁵ Woolf ascribes a sturdiness to her body that evades the hazy indistinctness or connotations of vanishing, emphasizing not the amorphous and unknown aspects that lay beneath her facade, but her external materiality, the mere proof of her aliveness, her presence. In the penultimate chapter and among the final passages of *Jacob's Room*, we

³³ Woolf, "Mr. Bennett," 1:16.

³⁴ Woolf, "An Unwritten," 16.

³⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 71.

return to Mrs. Pascoe in a familiar place: “Shading her eyes with her hand Mrs. Pascoe stood in her cabbage-garden looking out to sea” (*JR* 167). The narrator proceeds through a description of the landscape only to return to Mrs. Pascoe in a single-sentence paragraph: “Mrs. Pascoe had gone indoors long ago” (*JR* 167). Woolf’s deliberate temporal vagueness allows for a literal and figurative reading; Mrs. Pascoe tethered her mind to her domestic life, forever behind the gate, inside the confines of the home, out of sight.

While Mrs. Pascoe desperately clings to boundedness, Mrs. Durrant, Clara and Timothy’s mother, has a “mind” that “skimmed leagues where Pascoe’s adhered to its solitary patch” (*JR* 53). This “mind skimmed leagues as ponies climbed the hill road.” “Forwards and backwards,” Woolf writes, “she cast her mind, as if the roofless cottages, mounds of slag, and cottage gardens...cast shade upon her mind” (*JR* 53). The vagueness of this “forwards” and “backwards” traveling pushes Durrant towards an embrace of simultaneity and multiplicity, for this free flowing movement registers both the potential of covering a vastness of spatiality and temporality. This potential unbinds her, and “her hawk nose was thin as a bleached bone through which you almost see the light,” while her “hands, lying on the reins in her lap, were firm even in repose” (*JR* 53). As she looks across the summit’s landscape, her body recedes into transparency, her adventurous mind seems to dispense with the body, or at least attempt to, as she becomes more closely linked to the intangibility of the atmosphere than her corporeal materiality. On the edges of lucidity as she teeters between states of consciousness, as her mind moves forwards and backwards, as she sits “equally poised between gloom and laughter,” Woolf saturates her in inbetweenness. She lingers on the edges of the hill, of disappearance, of unraveling, but makes sure to grab hold of the concrete world by way of the reins, as if, like Rhoda in *The Waves*, she “must push [her] foot stealthily lest [she] should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness,”

touching “the rail” to “assure [herself]” of “something hard” so that she “cannot sink.”³⁶ Like Durrant, Rhoda is also translucent, and “lets the light through.”³⁷ Ultimately, Mrs. Durrant returns to the body by flicking the ponies, drawing herself back to the domestic sphere to host a party.

These women push past their limits and allow their longing to follow their curiosity, and in so doing they risk encountering possibilities and alternatives. I want to again acknowledge Sara Ahmed’s idea about how “the point of reaching these points seems to be a certain disappearance, a loss of possibility,” and that becoming “conscious of possibility can involve mourning for its loss.”³⁸ To avoid having to accept or surpass possibility, Clara scolds herself repeatedly for nearly crossing the diary’s boundary and skewing her schedule with desire; Miss Marchmont embarks on a search, disrupts, and recoils away from the “solid immense” British Museum and back to the comfort of the domestic; Mrs. Jarvis wanders along the moor while unhappy, but stops short of the farther, “more distant ridge” she wanted to reach (*JR* 103, 24). The threshold indicates what is and what is not “bearable.” Ahmed writes, “a bearable life is a life where what must be endured does not threaten that life, in either the bare facts of its existence or in the sense of its aim, direction, or purpose.”³⁹ If Mrs. Jarvis was to push past these limits and finally reach that farther ridge where she could encounter the idea of possibility, her liberation would be occluded by grief, its established aim and purpose obliterated for something different and new. Deep down, she knows this: Mrs. Jarvis was “just the sort of woman...to lose her faith upon the moors” and “leave her husband” (*JR* 24). Her unhappiness creates the conditions that allow for the roving of her body and mind. It pushes her outside, echoing some of

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2019), 44-45.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 44-45, 27.

³⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 71.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

Rachel's thoughts in *The Voyage Out* as she attempts to stop crying: "Thinking was no escape. Physical movement was the only refuge, in and out of rooms, in and out of people's minds, seeking what she knew not."⁴⁰ However, crossing this threshold would mean surrendering her commitment to and faith in the happy family narrative and marriage plot meant to be followed.

These women on the edges of the novel learn to contain their desire, thereby maintaining their identity and role, by containing the self in the environment. While they determine their identities by the domestic environment that they situate themselves in, these identities are probably more strongly informed by the spaces the characters fail to occupy. Unhappy in their sphere, they falsely imagine what remains uncharted on the other side of the gate, or at the farther ridge. They view desire within the narrative terms and structure that they've inherited. The masculine, public "sphere" and the feminine, private "sphere" are less globular and multidimensional than their names suggest; they formulate a binary, with one side necessary for the upholding of the other. Because of this, these women have a very linear and binary idea of how happiness might be obtained, and of how their narrative is both rigorously maintained and potentially ruptured: they demarcate life between "in" and "out." They turn away from the catastrophic and escape back into the domestic. They fiercely reason with themselves, settling for a frail dissimulation of contentedness that, while maintaining the antsiness of their dissatisfaction, still keeps them from breaking out of their domestic lives and into something unknown. To reach beyond, to cross their side and thus the threshold, would, for these women, mean having to breach the terms of the narrative contract of the marriage plot. Their identity inside their life narrative requires an awareness of the world, an awareness of how and where it holds them in order to reject an acknowledgement of the presence of unhappiness and prevent their worlds from shattering.

⁴⁰ Woolf, *The Voyage*, 269.

What might this reaching beyond look like? I find myself at a point of reckoning, in front of Florinda, who is the female character in *Jacob's Room* that I find the hardest to pin down and reach. She not only embraces and declares unhappiness in her entrance into the novel – she says “I’m so frightfully unhappy!” twice – but enters the story through a fire: “by the trick of the light, she seemed to have no body” (*JR* 70). Referred to as “the girl” until Woolf names her a page later, Florinda’s physical entrance through a fire near St. Paul’s Cathedral and thus into the narrative of *Jacob's Room* is as free-floating, inexplicable, and strange as both the fire itself and her verbal entrance into the narrative, her forthright acceptance of frightful unhappiness (*JR* 70). “The flames had fairly caught,” the chapter begins, and an unidentified “someone” shouts “There’s St. Paul’s!” to situate us. “As the wood caught the city of London was lit up for a second; on other sides of the fire there were trees” (*JR* 70). Though some faces could be seen through the fire, “the most prominent was a girl’s face” whose age was “between twenty and twenty-five.” But what exactly is on fire? How did it begin – and why? Are these faces seen through the fire also burning in it? It all remains unclear – all we know at this point is that: there is a fire in London; Florinda is unhappy. While the fire blazes, she seems “to have no body,” and as it grows, Woolf writes that “a hand descending from the chequered darkness thrust on her head the conical white hat of a pierrot.” Just a sentence later, “a whiskered face appeared[s] above her,” and suddenly, “they dropped two legs of a table upon the fire,” which “blazed up and showed faces far back,” and “showed too St. Paul’s floating on the uneven white mist” (*JR* 70). Given that Woolf establishes Florinda as disembodied, her introductions of body parts like the “hand” that descends, the “whiskered face” that hovers, and even the “two legs” of a “table” that fall into the blaze, momentarily appear like the fragmented, missing pieces of Florinda’s vanished body, now shattered and sailing through the smoky air.

Because there was such focus on the presence of faces and the absence of bodies that were refracted through the flames, when I first read that “they dropped two legs of a table upon the fire,” before I had reached “of a table,” the image of two human legs had already been conjured in my mind’s eye: I saw two human legs tumbling through the London night sky and onto a bed of flames. Things are indiscernible, they are melting and blending, and they refuse fixed distinction. Even St. Paul’s Cathedral inexplicably shakes its attachment from the ground as it floats among the veil of fog, and the fire’s extinguishment is as untraceable as its start: pails, “goodness knows where from...flung water” until “all of the faces went out.” It is then that Florinda pounds up the street and tells Jacob that she is “so frightfully unhappy!” Woolf denies both the fire and Florinda’s frightful unhappiness any initial causal connections or clear explanations, disorienting us with a chapter that teems with untethered impressions that cannot take shape.

Florinda is an untethered character: she is a head without body, she is unhappy without a cause, she doesn’t have one man but many, and she doesn’t even have a surname to trace her to an origin. She rejects and evades all but her frightful unhappiness. Woolf elevates her identity from “the girl” finally to “Florinda” as she takes “one of the purplish globes that lay on the table” at a party and flings “it straight at” a young man’s “head” where it “crushed to powder,” embracing her unhappiness in all its frightening extremity (*JR* 71). Once again, she tells Jacob that she is “so frightfully unhappy!” Naming her at the point of her destruction, yet still denying her a surname, Woolf stamps Florinda’s identity to this act of shattering, of splitting apart a sphere and world that does not belong to her but will nonetheless be blown through the atmosphere because of her. Florinda, unlike the women we’ve seen before, plunges forward into catastrophe. She is unable to estrange herself from her acquaintance with the depths of

“desperate” unhappiness, and because of this, her unhappiness is all encompassing – it does not even allow her to take refuge in the domestic, for her home “seemed fit for these catastrophes” (*JR* 73). Florinda leaves herself without any place, any sphere, that she can tether herself to. When her alliance with her own unhappiness shatters this globe – the idea of spheres – the illusion that those like Mrs. Pascoe and Mrs. Jarvis regard, of the *safety* of a home life that is just “happy enough,” shatters along with it.⁴¹ Untethered, her unhappiness unravels her longing and explodes the thresholds that might otherwise regulate the pull of desire.

With Florinda’s globe-crushing in mind, I want to return once more to “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Florinda’s act of destruction as an introduction of character registers Woolf’s line of critique on the Edwardians’ overreliance on material structures as the primary source of characterization. She prods the logic of this convention, questioning Arnold Bennett’s premise, as if a convincing and persuasively detailed description of a home would instantly produce a convincing character to reside within it; as if the history of the character’s hometown is interchangeable with – if not more important than – a character’s own personal “atmosphere.” “House property,” she writes, “was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy.”⁴² In the essay, Woolf rejects this dependence on the material and the tangible, the visible and verifiable as the only path to conceiving a convincing “reality,” sarcastically reflecting that “an old woman of course ought to be made of freehold villas and copyhold estates, not of imagination.”⁴³ And what, then, is Florinda – the floating and fleeting face on the fire’s mist – made of? When Woolf writes in her diary that her new literary form will have “no scaffolding” and “not a brick to be seen,” she calls for the crumbling of these villas and

⁴¹ For more on globes and spheres in Woolf’s work, see Chapter Three of Holly Henry’s *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science*. Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴² Woolf, “Mr. Bennett,” 1:17.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 19.

houses, the torching of these shops and copyhold estates.⁴⁴ To dispense with the scaffolding and brick, one must bulldoze; one must crush, like Florinda, and reduce them to powder. This is why the “prevailing sound” of her age is “breaking and falling, crashing and destruction,” as Woolf claims.⁴⁵ So to capture “character,” or more importantly, to “steep oneself in her atmosphere,” the tangible things that hide and house her, the “details” and facts which are so valued by the Edwardians, must shatter and crash and break loudly, for they must become like dust, like sound – they must simply be of the atmosphere.

I’m interested in the deliberateness of this shattering. Shattering is messy; it leaves you with broken, dangerous shards, hopeless pieces never again to be put back together. Shattering’s disruption is loud; its sound insists on itself – it ruptures the rhythm of the soundscape where it happens. To deliberately shatter something is to not just impair something, but it is to break something beyond the hope of repair, to obliterate what once was, to willingly wade in its scattered, hopeless, mess. Recall my earlier discussion of thresholds and how women reason with their unhappiness, a negotiation that Ahmed refers to as determining one’s life and what one must endure as “bearable” and “unbearable” lives. We meet Florinda after her bearable life has become unbearable, when it has become “a life which cannot be tolerated or endured, held up, held onto,” as Ahmed puts it.⁴⁶ Florinda’s “unbearable life ‘breaks’ or ‘shatters’ under the ‘too much’ of what is being borne,” which we aren’t privy to. Ahmed writes that this “‘too much’ is experienced as the breaking of...the endurance that sustains suffering insofar as it is borne,” and “when ‘it’ is too much, things break, you reach a breaking point.” The “too much” doesn’t break her, she breaks “it.” Florinda, while seeped in catastrophe and found at points of destruction and incineration, emerges as a manifestation of how Woolf hoped “everything” in her new form

⁴⁴ Woolf, *The Diary Vol.II*, 13.

⁴⁵ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett,” 1:20.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 97.

would arise: “as bright as fire in the mist.”⁴⁷ While figures like Florinda directly contribute to the “prevailing sound of the...age” with their “breaking and falling, crashing and destruction,” this demolition gives way, gives light – doesn’t just break things but it breaks things *open*.⁴⁸

Each time she declares her unhappiness, Florinda is talking to Jacob. She summons him, but he, like Mr. Bennett, does not respond to female unhappiness, ignoring its disruption as best he can.⁴⁹ Like Woolf’s figure of Mr. Smith in the carriage sketch found in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” who sees Mrs. Brown’s tears as “nonsense,” Florinda’s unhappiness makes Jacob attend to Timothy Durrant, to whom he says, “now, let us talk...about something sensible” (*JR* 71).⁵⁰ And what, to Jacob, is sensible? “The Greeks – yes, that was what they talked about” (*JR* 71). Set against this dialogue, Florinda’s second declaration of her unhappiness gets cast as unsensible nonsense. Her first declaration also fails to be met with a direct response, and is instead followed by “shouts of laughter” that “came from the others – high, low; some before, others after.” Her unhappiness is set off against untethered, nonsensical noise, the sound that is motivated by and responds to silliness. Laughter is a sound that not only interrupts, but shatters too; laughter is what breaks character. Her failure to receive a response recalls a later scene that describes the city of London after the British Museum Reading Room has closed its doors and its visitors, including Jacob and Miss Marchmont, depart. One woman, who “has come home drunk...cries all night long, ‘Let me in! Let me in!’” (*JR* 103). The next sentence, a one sentence paragraph formatted just like Florinda’s “shouts of laughter,” defers the woman’s disruption to

⁴⁷ Woolf, *The Diary Vol. II*, 13.

⁴⁸ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett,” 1:20.

⁴⁹ Across Woolf’s work, male characters ignore female unhappiness by walking away from crying women. *The Voyage Out*, Woolf’s very first venture into novel writing, begins as “tears rolled down” Mrs. Ambrose’s face, “and leaning her elbows on the balustrade, she shielded her face from the curious. Mr. Ambrose attempted consolation; he patted her shoulder; but she showed no signs of admitting him, and feeling it awkward to stand beside a grief that was greater than his, he crossed his arms behind him, and took a turn along the pavement.” She does not submit to his dismissal, as “she knew she must go back to all that, but at present she must weep” (Woolf, *The Voyage*, 3-5).

⁵⁰ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett,” 1:8.

“the street below Jacob’s room” where “voices were raised” (*JR* 103). “In spite” of her demand for access past some barrier, “Plato continues his dialogue” and Jacob “read[s] on” for “Plato continues imperturbably” (*JR* 103). And as he turns his pages, still the woman was “battering at the door and crying, ‘Let me in!’ as if a coal had dropped from the fire” (*JR* 104). The all-important Greek dialogues continue, no matter how loud and messy and exhaustive female expressions are.

This drunk woman’s interminable pounding – her plea for access into some room somewhere – is also her desperate appeal to be admitted into a narrative; into *Jacob’s Room*. A proverbial woman on the periphery emerges as the discarded female character of fiction, while simultaneously occupying the forgotten feminized position of women’s lives. This drama and desperation that Woolf’s work repeatedly grapples with, begs for a response, and we seek a way for our desires to fit inside the narrative we’ve been dealt but it is clear – we do not fit, and we cannot expect to be admitted, or even given the satisfaction of a response.

These women on the periphery do what you do when you are outside of narrative: they read.⁵¹ Across Woolf’s work, yearning women play out the following scene repeatedly: a man recommends a book to her, she tries reading it, and the narrative bores her so much that it drives her to sleep, to daydream, or to gaze out the window as if in a trance, keeping her from reaching the book’s conclusion. Jacob lends Florinda a copy of Shelley’s poetry at his recommendation, and when she “opened Shelley,” she was “truly” and “horribly bored,” asking herself: “what on earth was it *about*?” (*JR* 75). Slogging through the book, “she had to wager with herself that she would turn the page before she ate another” chocolate. “In fact,” Woolf writes, “she slept” (*JR*

⁵¹ Kate Flint explores Woolf’s views on reading by examining Woolf’s own reading habits, those of her fictional characters, as well as her writings about reading, partially noting the repeated movement of readers away from their books. See: Kate Flint, “Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1998): 187-198, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3508657>.

74-75). Bearing witness to someone else's story through the written word, readers like Florinda occupy what Susan Stewart describes as the "invisible social space of reading and writing, a space defined temporally and spatially as outside and above the quotidian."⁵² Because the act of reading is already about being outside, above, and inconsequential to a story that plays out before them, these women are doubly ostracized. They are initially detached from the real-life narratives of the world just outside of their windows, and because literature fails as a catalyst for discovering alternative trajectories to follow, they hang suspended above the stories that lie in their laps. They cannot see, or imagine themselves, inside those narratives; they do not read to become heroines.

Jacob professes later to another young woman, Fanny Elmer, that there seems to be no point in reading "anything besides Marlowe and Shakespeare... and Fielding, if [she] must read novels." So Fanny purchases Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and finds it to be "dull stuff" (*JR* 115). While Fanny's employment of "dull" indicates the boredom that the novel lulls her into, this dullness might equally suggest her impression of its stupidity or mindlessness.⁵³ Perhaps a confluence of both, she internalizes her boredom as her incompetence, as her lack of taste, her ignorance. The opinions of others fold her into acquiescence, and she deems her own experience of the novel as somehow wrong and theirs right, because "good people read it" – and because "Jacob liked" it (*JR* 116). Fanny overtly associates Jacob's identity with his admiration for *Tom Jones*, repeating to herself, "it all came from *Tom Jones*" when thinking about Jacob. Fanny's encounter with the novel arrives almost as an extension of Woolf's experience reading Byron. In a 1918 diary entry, Woolf prefaced her feelings about the text with what she assumed her father would have thought.

⁵² Stewart, *On Longing*, 14.

⁵³ In *The Years*, Sally also refers to the book she reads as "dull" and finds herself distracted: "The little brown book was dull. She reached her hand above her head and took down another book from the shelf of battered books without looking at it. She opened the book at random; but her eye was caught by one of the couples who were still sitting out in the garden though the others had gone in." (Woolf, *The Years*, 134).

It was, after all, her father who introduced her to literature through access to his library during her childhood. She writes in her diary that Byron “had, evidently, the able witty mind of what [her] father Sir Leslie would have called a thoroughly masculine nature.”⁵⁴ Like Fanny’s critique of *Tom Jones*’s dullness, Woolf goes on to write that she was “much impressed by the extreme badness of B.’s poetry,” wondering “why...they [thought] this Album stuff the finest fire of poetry.”⁵⁵ Woolf – and Fanny – can only extend their impressions of these classics under the conditions issued by the men in their lives.

Fanny feels as though she must identify herself with and by the narrative, and when she discovers that it has no place for her, its offering of nothingness swells into hostility. Its dullness surpasses its affliction of boredom and rises into antagonism against her “passion for ear-rings” and clothes, which she “feasted upon,” as the “mystic book” is one “in which Henry Fielding ever so many years ago rebuked Fanny Elmer for feasting on scarlet, in perfect prose, Jacob said” (*JR* 114, 116). Women like Fanny begin to feel that books should join ranks of clothes and take on a role that is nothing more than decorative; in Fanny’s introduction, she sits passively as a model for a painter, “holding in her hand a yellow novel” (*JR* 108). Images of the taunting author advance and surpass the text itself in this distracted kind of reading, and Woolf similarly imagines “the effect [Byron] had upon women – especially upon rather stupid or uneducated women, unable to stand up to him.” Reflecting on her lack of education, Fanny has Fielding affect her in this exact way, and she lies to Jacob – “I do like *Tom Jones*” she says.⁵⁶ In Woolf’s posthumously published essay “Reading,” she expands more on the impression of “dullness” that certain books of the literary canon inflict, and the subsequent self-inflicted blame it comes with,

⁵⁴ Woolf, *The Diary Vol. I*, 181; for more on Woolf and Byron, see Chapter 4 of Anne Fernald’s book, where Fernald writes about Byron’s influence on Woolf in relation to fame and the public sphere: Anne E. Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 117-160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

particularly for women. Of Sir Thomas Browne, she writes that “he is, as all great men are, a little dull,” and the “dullness of the great” convinces readers “that if the light is lacking the fault is ours.”⁵⁷ Like with Fanny, Woolf illustrates that the “sense of guilt, as the horror increases, mingles itself with our protest and increases the gloom,” muttering under our breath, “surely, we have missed the way.” Even if she tries to persist through the gloom and horror with an “obedience” to the standard of literary greatness, its dullness remains; if every great writer, from Milton to Shakespeare, laced together their work, it would “make a formidable volume — the dullest book in the world.”

In the escapist fantasy framework of reading that seems to erect itself in opposition to what is Woolf charting here, reading provides female yearning with an embodied possibility which gives their longing a direction to grasp onto; a plot to dream themselves into; a new role or identity to aspire to and assume. This theory of reading insists on identification, on transposing oneself onto and transporting oneself into the narratives they consume, possibly offering aspirational visions of hope for their own lives.⁵⁸ These readers face the danger of failing to conceive identities outside of the narrative structures they’ve come to understand through literature. Woolf’s female readers, however, follow a track that carries different consequences for their yearning. When the written word fails to do anything reparative, reading becomes about abdicating narrative entirely. Small moments like these – being handed a text by a man and being horribly bored it – recall a whole line of readers who come before and after Fanny and Florinda in Woolf’s work, readers whose reading experiences register their inability to follow the

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Reading,” in *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf; Edited and with a Pref. by Mary Lyon* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 30.

⁵⁸ Rachel Brownstein explores this kind of aspirational, transpositional reading, writing that “young women like to read about heroines in fiction so as to rehearse possible lives and to imagine a woman’s life as more important.” The function of reading for the women I examine, on the other hand, does not coax them with possibilities to rehearse. For more, see: Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), xxiv.

expectations dealt to them, like the marriage plot, and are driven not *into* these narratives but *away* from them; they drift into sleep, distraction, imagination, and observation of their own external worlds. As a result, they never finish reading their books. Even the unhappy Mrs. Jarvis who jaunts across the moors to read her poetry, ‘never,’ in fact, “read her poem through” (*JR* 24). They avoid conclusion in the same way that the narrator abandons them without resolve. Though some succumb – and lie, like Fanny – the rest, like *The Voyage Out*’s Rachel, drift elsewhere. But where do they drift?

Unable to finish her book and left suspended and wandering in her directionless longing, Mrs. Jarvis, “thinks to herself, ‘If only someone could give me... If I could give someone...’ But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it to her” (*JR* 24). Wanting itself marks the progression, the middle of a narrative. The marriage plot, which Mrs. Jarvis has followed, closes, of course, at marriage, and it suggests that her desire should be satisfied by reaching this end. But as the married Mrs. Jarvis still finds herself longing, her yearning displaces her outside the expectations of the marriage plot, its disobedience persisting past and outside of that narrative’s expectations. Without an ending to orient her towards, she aimlessly searches for a someone and a something that might offer direction, but the ellipses leaves her desire inconclusive and unwritten. In regards to the conclusion of a reading experience, Susan Stewart writes that “the closure of a book is an illusion largely created by its materiality, its cover” because “once the book is considered on the pane of its significance, it threatens infinity.”⁵⁹ To finish the book, for Mrs. Jarvis, would be to confront the book’s materiality – the fixity of conclusion. There are no alternative paths for it to take once closed up and read through. By holding off on closure and not finishing their books, these women hold fast to their longing as it stretches them thin; they hold fast to the possibility that alternative narratives might arise and

⁵⁹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 38.

intercept the one they've been dealt, so as to whisk them away from definitive conclusion, threatening infinity.

As Mrs. Jarvis drifts away from her poetry, resisting and delaying the definiteness of closure, it is the timeless landscape that seduces her longing. She:

never read her poem through, and went on walking the moors, looking at the moon behind the elm trees, and feeling as she sat on the grass high above Scarborough... Yes, yes, when the lark soars; when the sheep, moving a step or two onwards, crop the turf, and at the same time set their bells tinkling; when the breeze first blows, then dies down, leaving the cheek kissed; when the ships on the sea below seem to cross each other and pass on as if drawn by an invisible hand; when there are distant concussions in the air and phantom horsemen galloping, ceasing; when the horizon swims blue, green, emotional (*JR* 24).

The above passage, only one sentence, is stretched and elongated past the expectations of the grammar that houses it. The sentence resists an ending. Just as Mrs. Jarvis finds herself stuck in the marriage plot's monotony of middle age ("seeing that she was forty-five, would never perhaps be very unhappy, desperately unhappy that is"), the stretching out of the sentence situates readers in this perpetualness, this stuckness of a progression without an end in sight.

While Mrs. Jarvis glances at the moon, the "feeling" she has is never clarified. Woolf prolongs a conclusion not only with an immediate ellipsis, but also with the affirmative response of "yes, yes" (*JR* 24). But what is being affirmed? How does Mrs. Jarvis feel? Woolf rejects direct characterization – initially. Alongside Mrs. Jarvis, we are instead suspended among the landscape's natural beauty, as well as its history and potential. Mrs. Jarvis' feeling, then, is identified as the atmosphere itself, as the series of scenes playing out along the horizon as it

“swims blue, green, emotional” (*JR* 25). Although “emotional” lies within the clause that describes the “horizon,” it is also the last word in that section, before returning to Mrs. Jarvis’ identity. Tracing the passage back through the ellipsis, “emotional” refers to how she is “feeling,” too. She is *feeling emotional* but only because she is “feeling” the “horizon,” which *swims emotional*. Mrs. Jarvis, situated inside this doubleness, almost melds into the horizon, as her “feeling” is suspended across and inside the description of the atmosphere and the atmosphere itself.

Reading emerges as a site of removal, threatening, almost teasing disappearance. Woolf dispenses with traditional syntactical hierarchies – clauses become displaced and submerged into other clauses, objects that direct the verbs become cloudy if not lost altogether, the simplicity of intervals as markers of time recede. Revoking the timeline that is usually enforced by traditional sentence structures and narratives, sequential order can no longer be relied on, nor found. Consecutive sentences, neat and orderly, function like the consecutivity of days. In that sense, the length of this single sentence challenges the fixity of temporal order, stretching the sentence out so long that maybe, just maybe, as an ending has not yet been reached – and we are still suspended in the middle without finding a sign of conclusion – she can stop time. Suspended in the sentence, we are suspended in time right along with Mrs. Jarvis and her directionless longing. Time doesn't stop when the sentence stops. Time stops when the sentence continues; is continuing. It stops when the present is suspended, when the sentence doesn't end, producing a sort of stuckness where it becomes impossible to move forward, to distinguish between a present and a future. Desire without a goal – which is relentless and antagonizing in its insistence on closure, gets drawn out even more through her aimless yearning, transforming a feeling that requires anticipation into something that is incommensurable with anticipation entirely –

perpetuity itself. This collapsing of the structure opens up a space for Jarvis to exist in that reflects what Susan Stewart calls the “invisible social space of reading and writing.”⁶⁰ Stewart expands on this invisibility, writing that “although reading may give form to time, it does not count in time; it leaves no trace, its product is invisible.” Reading becomes dissociative. This essential formlessness of reading, its inherent resistance to crystallize into anything but itself is precisely why reading cannot offer, to these women, anything except space, atmosphere. In her posthumously published essay, “Reading,” Woolf expands on the relationship between distracted reading and “atmosphere,” writing that as “you read on across the broad pages with as many slips and somnolences as you like, the illusion rises,” and “it is, indeed, an atmosphere, not only soft and fine, but rich, too, with more than one can grasp at any single reading.”⁶¹ The atmosphere expands, even after one shuts the book; what with reading and ceasing to read, taking a few steps this way and then pausing to look at the view, the view outside the window changes, even when the “treasure” of the novel had “not” been “exhausted.”

For these women, the act of reading isn’t about momentary relief or distraction from their lives. It’s not about exchanging their own narratives for those of fiction. It’s about eliminating the need for narrative altogether. They long not to assume a different and better self, but to relinquish identity entirely; not to enter the circumstances of someone else’s story, but to evade shape and drift away from structure – to enter, instead, into the atmosphere.⁶² In a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf wrote that reading is “a disembodied and trance-like rapture” that “consists in the

⁶⁰ Stewart, *On Longing*, 14.

⁶¹ Woolf, “Reading,” 21.

⁶² Other female characters across Woolf’s fiction similarly use books as a portal to a dissociative, disembodied experience. Eleanor in *The Years* “took one of her little books that she had dropped on the table and laid it open on her knee. But she did not look at it,” for “there was something stained in the atmosphere.” Instead, “her glance fixed itself rather absentmindedly upon the farther room” where “the trees were coming out of the back garden” (Woolf, *The Years*, 16).

complete elimination of the *ego*.⁶³ Although these women don't take to the texts themselves, reading nonetheless expands and suspends them into that same disembodied, dissociative state of consciousness. Writing in her diary about reading Byron, Woolf admitted that "Byron was full of ideas – a quality that gives his verse a toughness, & drives [her] to little excursions over the surrounding landscape or room in the middle of [her] reading."⁶⁴ These "little excursions" recall Rachel's reading experience in *The Voyage Out*, a novel that instrumentalizes literature as its primary means of characterization. Rachel throws one book down, unfinished, and picks up "*Cowper's Letters*, the classic prescribed by her father which," like Florinda, "had bored her, so that one sentence chancing to say something about the smell of a broom in his garden" made her see the "little hall at Richmond laden with flowers on the day of her mother's funeral." From "one scene she passed, half-hearing, half-seeing, to another" of her own life.⁶⁵ Rachel is not submerged inside the text but launched outside of time, traipsing back and forth through her memories. In *Jacob's Room* we find a similar scene in Sandra Wentworth Williams's reading, as she "would open the books and her eyes would brighten (but not at the print)" (*JR* 153). She, like Rachel, sweeps through time as if it was made of atmosphere surrounding her, for when she sat in her chair, Sandra "would suck back again the soul of the moment." Her "restless" disposition expands during the excursions away from her books, and she "would pull out book after book and swing across the whole space of her life like an acrobat from bar to bar." But "meanwhile, the great clock on the landing ticked and Sandra would hear time accumulating," and like Mrs. Jarvis and Miss Marchmont, interrogate herself, asking "What for? What for?" (*JR* 153). The

⁶³ Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, July 29, 1934, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-1980), II:319.

⁶⁴ Woolf, *The Diary Vol. I*, 181.

⁶⁵ Woolf, *The Voyage*, 29-30.

book opens, and so too does space and time; she floats and flies over the years of her life as if time was a tumbling mat she doesn't dare graze.

This same disembodiment gives way to Rachel's ability to mimic time, to rival the dominance of its cadence with her own idiosyncratic rhythms. Sitting in her room one morning, "the exercise of reading left [Rachel's] mind contracting and expanding like the mainspring of a clock," as she suddenly felt that everything "was all very real, very big, very impersonal, and after a moment or two she began to raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence."⁶⁶ After her time spent reading, she lingers on the edges of her own consciousness, wondering about life: "what was that?" she thinks. She sees life as "only a light passing over the surface and vanishing, as in time she would vanish, though the furniture in the room would remain." Not only will she vanish *because of time*, which seems to be suggested by this statement, she will, in fact, vanish "*in time*" – she will disappear inside its rhythms; her yearning becoming indistinguishable from time itself, from perpetuity, so she can exist without conclusion. But she "continued to be conscious of these vast masses of substance for a long stretch of time, the clock still ticking in the midst of the universal silence."⁶⁷ Her reading experience, which extends past the materiality of the book itself, into "her dissolution" which had become so "complete that she could not raise her finger anymore." Her physical existence flickers in the moments that linger around the act of reading.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay also finds literature as a catalyst for desertion, and like Rachel, she is so entrenched in the exhaustion of her own consciousness that the movement of her finger is all she can manage: she "seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in

⁶⁶ Ibid, 126; Susan Stanford Friedman has examined Rachel's scenes of reading extensively, arguing that her distracted and imaginative reading serves primarily as a "positive and negative model for reading." See: Susan Stanford Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes of Reading: 'The Voyage Out, The Common Reader,' and her 'Common Readers,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1992):101-125.

⁶⁷ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 126.

another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, across the page of Grimm's fairy story, while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation."⁶⁸ In these moments of lingering, the physical self – the container of their expansive consciousness – is always on the verge of disappearance. The body weaves itself into the realm of intangibility, even if only by way of exhaustion's predilection. But these women occupy the disorienting position of suspension between the material narratives, and the atmospheric intangibility of unknown possibility. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Rachel, in this state of consciousness, are likened to symbols of time; a pulse. Their departure from their narratives on their laps end with the clock ticking – issuing the threat of temporality's dire simultaneity: its ephemerality and endlessness.

If time contains them, or restrains them, rather, then their experience of suspension – through reading – allows these women to linger on the edges where time slips over them and where they slip past time, momentarily. Calendrical time organizes our everyday lives, and Henry Fielding explicitly employs it to structure *Tom Jones*, the novel that Fanny Elmer calls “dull stuff” (*JR* 115). Focusing on its capacity to limit, to determine and define, many of the novel's chapter titles begin with the word “containing” and then refer to a certain length of time which the chapter's contents will depict. For example, Book IV is titled “Containing the Time of a Year” and Book V, “Containing a Portion of Time Somewhat Longer than Half a Year,” “Containing Three Weeks” and “Containing Three Days,” etc.⁶⁹ This recalls Clara Durrant, whose desire, and thus, narrative, could not be contained within the confines of calendrical time's authority, withholding her expression so that she did not “encroach upon Wednesday” (*JR*

⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York, New York.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 42-43.

⁶⁹ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008).

67). Clara “wished the moment to continue for ever as it was” but this desire is in vain. She is brought up short by the brief declarative sentence: “And moments don’t” (*JR* 67). *Jacob’s Room* doesn’t have time for Fanny or Clara and nor does *Tom Jones*. The women feel excluded. Time and the novel dismiss them and refuse to favor their stories. Woolf’s diary entry about the new form for *Jacob’s Room* that points to its lack of “scaffolding” also describes it as “crepuscular.”⁷⁰ This word places the novel in twilight, a state of perpetual in-betweenness, a state whose focus is both anticipatory and nostalgic, a state in which one’s sense of time is heightened, a state of transition, a state so beautiful one wants to be left in it for longer – but a state whose ephemerality inspires this longing in the first place.

We see a discrepancy between the expectations of structured narratives and the disobedience of women’s desire, and as the women vacillate between the two, their repeated traversal back and forth leaves them occupying this gap. In this gap, the women are suspended and displaced, floating further away and higher above, relentless and unstable, until they tether themselves back to expectation. Eventually, they’re forced, like Sandra Wentworth Williams, to drop from the heights of the acrobat bars that allow them to survey time, and fall right back into it – into life. And that dismally inevitable and jolting journey down is nauseating – it leaves them sick. That gap induces the uncertainty of nausea, an inbetweenness so disorienting that it offers nothing to grasp onto. In the chapter that focuses on Florinda, Woolf leaves us with this series of one-sentence paragraphs:

Florinda was sick.

Mrs. Durrant, sleepless as usual, scored a mark by the side of certain lines in the *Inferno*.

⁷⁰ Woolf, *The Diary Vol. II*, 13-14.

Clara slept buried in her pillows; on her dressing-table disheveled roses
and a pair of long white gloves.

Still wearing the conical white hat of a pierrot, Florinda was sick” (*JR* 73).

This gap, this absence that is embedded into the pages of the text itself, is where the dissolved woman lies; this empty space is the place that longing goes – through sleep, through reading, and through sickness, these women appear and disappear within the same moment.⁷¹ Florinda’s frightful unhappiness, which leaves her ill, anticipates Fanny’s frightful longing, an “irrational passion” that made Jacob “afraid of her for a moment – so violent, so dangerous it is when young women stand rigid; grasp the barrier; fall in love” (*JR* 112). But as Woolf brings us to Hampstead Garden in the very next paragraphs, Fanny’s longing bore her a “long illness.” Woolf writes: “the body after long illness is languid, passive, receptive of sweetness, but too weak to contain it. The tears well and fall as the dog barks in the hollow, the children skim after hoops, the country darkens and brightens. Beyond a veil it seems. Ah, but draw the veil thicker lest I faint with sweetness, Fanny Elmer sighed” (*JR* 112). Out of reach, Fanny lingers on the edges of the moment, unable to fully grasp it, leaving her stranded in a waiting game. If the veil lifts, allowing her to try taking hold of the moment’s sweetness with more vigor, the materiality of her body becomes a threat against her access to it; she’d faint.

I hear echoes of this scene in Woolf’s later essay “On Being Ill” (1926), in which Woolf gestures repeatedly to the failure to clutch, hold, or grasp things during illness. Striving to

⁷¹ Emily Riles argues that visual punctuations, like the gaps between these one-sentence paragraphs “informs the novel’s claims about the political physicality of representation.” While Riles maintains that the “printed spaces enact the parallel between Jacob’s inability to express his experiences and the narrator’s refusal to fill the space of the page with words,” reflecting “the narrator’s distance from Jacob’s inner book,” I want to move away from the idea that Jacob alone gives the space its form, and towards a reading that includes the literary absence of women as part of this “political physicality of representation.” See: Emily Riles, “The Politics of Punctuation in Jacob’s Room and Between the Acts,” *Textual Practice* 33, no. 4 (2017), 519-39.

describe his illness, the sufferer “[takes] his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other” and combines the two.⁷² Woolf materializes illness with an insufficient metaphor; the pain of illness is reduced to only what a palm can handle, to a vague, tangible object, minimizing it, exemplifying how language misrepresents and obscures pain. Nothing, however, comes of this convergence, as Woolf postulates that “[the combination] to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out” which will “probably...be something laughable.”⁷³ She also suggests that the sympathy of others fails to remediate the pain, because “human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way.”⁷⁴ Even though hands register connection, they form a linkage that eventually accrues an intolerability: “always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable.”⁷⁵ The focus on the body, like Fanny’s body and these hands that drop, posit tangibility as a problem. And so Fanny, with tears in her eyes and a body too fragile to grasp everything she experiences, falls into place with other diaphanous “wandering women” who are a “little bit glazed, absorbed,” and whose longing leads them astray: “at midday, young women walk out into the air” (*JR* 112). With bodies too weak and their love too violent, they reach out, and the only thing that returns their embrace is the air, the atmosphere, that absence.

Woolf’s work has always concerned locating the absent women of fiction. Like Julia Hedge, “the feminist” in *Jacob’s Room* who wishes that a Bronte’s name could be emblazoned on the dome of the British Museum Reading Room alongside all of the great male authors, Woolf’s narrator in her later work, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), searches for nonexistent representations of women: “it would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about

⁷² Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1994), 4:319.

⁷³ Woolf, “On Being,” 319.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 320.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 320-1.

the shelves for books that were not there.”⁷⁶ This same narrator fails to find what she seeks in the fictional university, Oxbridge, as the guards forbid her entrance unless she returns with a man to accompany her. In 1928 with *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf embarked on a literary historical project of writing into absence, conjuring the figure of Judith Shakespeare – the hypothetical sister to William who possessed the same talent, potential, and genius that he had. Woolf outlines what her life would have looked like, inventing a history through fiction, both mediums which have been denied to her.⁷⁷ While she locates these women in the unwritten places, she herself produced the novelistic version of what she claims in *A Room of One's Own* is the damage of literary history, with *Jacob's Room*. Woolf forces us to look at absences across *Jacob's Room* – absences erected by her gaze entirely; those voids in the novel wouldn't exist had she not looked them, or written them, into existence. She occludes the women, but includes the absences that their curtailed or directionless desire lead them into.

Just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it no longer exists; nor does it affirm that this “something” has disappeared at all. To disappear can mean to withdraw from detection, to escape from the threat of perception. If – in this catalog of longing women, unhappy women, disappearing women who want but do not know what they want – their undetermined, ongoing desire derails them from the traditional course of longing, threatening them with disappearance, where, if at all, can this desire get rerouted? Woolf revokes the possible alternative from our line of sight, but she refuses to submit it to permanent disappearance. In the original manuscript of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf included a chapter that she later titled, “A Woman's College from Outside,” but cut it from the final draft, publishing it four years later as an independent short

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, First Harvard ed. (San Diego, C.A.: Harcourt, 1989), 45.

⁷⁷ A lot of focus has been dedicated to Woolf's creation of a speculative literary women's history in Woolf Studies. For instance, see: Susan Stanford Friedman, “'Shakespeare's Sister': Woolf in the World before *A Room of One's Own*,” in *Virginia Woolf: Writing the World*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie and Diana L. Swanson (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 22-27. Additionally: Anne Fernald, “'A Room of One's Own,' Personal Criticism, and the Essay,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 165-189.

story.⁷⁸ In just over three pages, it follows Angela Williams during the midnight hours spent in the women's college dormitory, laughing and resisting sleep with her friends, Bertha, Helena, and Alice. This vanishing chapter produces a response to this kind of longing's despair, a response that ushers a vision of female futurity by embracing the desire to disappear, rather than rejecting it. This "discovery," is found in the company of other women and culminates during a sapphic encounter, when Alice kisses Angela.

Not only does the chapter's removal expel the existence of these women from Jacob's narrative, but it disposes of their secluded space – the "woman's college" – as well. While the chapter would stand out for a variety of reasons had it been included in the novel, the scene would be likely the only instance of women sharing space and time together that is not eclipsed by interruptions of men or curtailments of their own desires. It is the chapter's disappearance from *Jacob's Room* itself that registers its proposed answer or response to female yearning all the more important. On one hand, the chapter puts forth — in the form of Angela's "discovery" as Alice kisses her — an alternative, "good world" with queer possibility.⁷⁹ One might read its removal as verification of the world as mere fantasy— rendering queer joy such as that unlikely if not impossible. What if, instead, the decision to remove the chapter proves Woolf's commitment to depicting this alternative world as it actually is – *inclined* to disappearing – while

simultaneously subverting the negative connotations that female disappearance poses? Situating

⁷⁸ Not very much has been written on this vanishing chapter. What has been written focuses on analyzing it as part of larger study of Woolf's editorial revisions to *Jacob's Room*, the female characters' use of profanity, and as an important framework to understand both *The Waves*'s fertility plots and a possible alternative to suicide for Rhoda. In an oversimplified misreading, the lattermost suggestion flattens Rhoda's desperate sadness through this hypothetical, as if she could have evaded the depths of her despair had she established herself in a lesbian intellectual community like the one depicted in this chapter. Cramer, however, fails to consider the story's brevity and, likewise, Rhoda's depression on its own terms in a search to save her from suicide. See: Kate Flint, "Revising *Jacob's Room*: Virginia Woolf, Women, and Language," *The Review of English Studies* 42, no. 167 (August 1991): 367-379; Erin Penner, "'Curse This War': Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Profanity," *Modernism/modernity* 26, no. 4 (November 2019): 846-68; Patricia Cramer, "Jane Harrison and Lesbian Plots: The Absent Lover in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*," *Studies in the Novel* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 443-63.

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, "A Woman's College from Outside," in *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf* (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 9.

“A Woman’s College from Outside” inside the larger context of *Jacob’s Room* would unfairly force readers to consider the women’s college in relation to their male counterparts’ institutions that dominate the novel.⁸⁰ Comparison of the institutions casts a leveling effect over them, reinforcing the binary in which these experiences are placed thus diminishing the intangible, *momentary* spirit of what exactly it is that Woolf is proposing with “A Woman’s College from Outside.” I read the removal of the chapter not as foreclosing upon the possibility and likelihood of future sapphic happiness, but as reflecting the importance of “not idealiz[ing] queer worlds or simply locat[ing] them in an alternative space,” as Sara Ahmed insists.⁸¹ To include the chapter in *Jacob’s Room* would mean locating the sapphic alternative possibility literally in an alternative space carved out as a separate institutional community and as a separate chapter within the larger men’s narrative. This would mean investing in a “promise of queer” – and the promise of queer happiness – that can emerge so long as queer people work to establish these spaces of community with one another.⁸² Both the spatial and temporal settings – college dorms and the night time – loom with anticipation, for they are temporary, transient – they are to be left, they are to end. As Ahmed describes, “lesbian desires create spaces, often temporary spaces, that come and go with the coming and going of the bodies that inhabit them.”⁸³ Woolf plants the sapphic story in settings that embody and reflect the implications of lesbian desire and, by

⁸⁰ In a slightly similar vein, Suzana Zink argues that “A Woman’s College from Outside” anticipates *A Room of One’s Own*. See: Suzana Zink, “Trespassing: Spaces of Learning in Jacob’s Room,” in *Virginia Woolf’s Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 99-124.

⁸¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 106.

⁸² I push against the reading of “A Woman’s College from Outside” that roots itself in the story’s supposed utopian ideal. Patricia Cramer reads the story as an alternative route for *The Waves*’s Rhoda, who might have avoided suicide had she encountered and maintained this “sapphic dream of a women’s intellectual community.” I push back against the notion that a sustained community would save Rhoda, nor do I believe this short story proposes any sort of long-term solution or alternative to the perpetual strife endured while living in an overwhelmingly heteronormative world; the story is not concerned with preserving a space or path of longevity. See: Patricia Cramer, “Jane Harrison and Lesbian Plots: The Absent Lover in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” *Studies in the Novel* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2005):443-63.

⁸³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 106.

association, lesbian happiness. Though much overlooked, safety undergirds any potentiality for happiness, and historically, queer people have been familiar with a certain degree of invisibility or indistinguishability that would allow them safety. I am more interested in how this familiarity in ricocheting between appearance and disappearance might inform the way in which Woolf locates lesbian joy and emphasizes the potential for alternative narratives and worlds.

I read this alongside Ahmed's ideas that "the alternative forms of world making within queer cultures" tend to "draw different kinds of lines, which do not aim to keep things in their places."⁸⁴ Moreover, "it is because" the heteronormative "world is already in place that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence but to listen to the sound of the 'what' that fleets."⁸⁵ If, as Ahmed claims, a queer world is a fleeting world, then a queer moment has the power to hold a queer world. I use what Woolf describes as "moments of being" in her posthumously published memoir of the same name to define this kind of suspended or held moment. Woolf describes these moments as having "a sudden shock," as "something happen[ing] so violently" that it imprints on the memory for life.⁸⁶ Of three moments she conjures, two "ended in a state of despair," whereas the final one, in which she looked at a flower and thought to herself "that is the whole," ended "in a state of satisfaction" for she "felt that [she] had made a discover." So too did Angela after Avery kissed her in the deleted chapter. Angela was "positively unable to sit still, like one possessed of a wind-lashed sea in her heart," and realized that she had found "life; the world" which was "all good; all lovable. Such was her discovery."⁸⁷ In this moment, she discovered the world. While editors titled her memoir *Moments of Being* in its posthumous publication, she used the phrase to

⁸⁴ Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 565, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202832>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 2nd ed. (San Diego, C.A.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 71.

⁸⁷ Woolf, "A Woman's," 9.

title a short story, “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points” that ends very similarly to “Woman’s College from Outside.” At a piano lesson, a girl named Fanny Wilmot drops her corsage’s pin and flower, and while searching the floor for the pin, ruminates about her teacher, Julia Craye whose characterizations hint towards her lesbianism. The story, whose present events only last just for a moment – spanning mere minutes if not seconds, culminates with a kiss between the two women. Woolf writes, “Julia blazed. Julia kindled. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia opened her arms. Julia kissed her on the lips. Julia possessed it,” after which Fanny “pinned the flower to her breast with trembling fingers.”⁸⁸

A moment is small, by definition its vague yet intrinsic limitations demolish potential to expand and extend. A moment isn’t technical – which allows it to wiggle around precision of calendrical and clock time of minutes and seconds, vacillating, hovering indistinctly, somewhere in between. But a life of happiness – happiness as a desire that life is aimed toward – overshadows the transitory meagerness of *just* a moment of happiness. Woolf challenges the value of a moment that disappears in “Woman’s College from Outside.” She establishes the scene with a looseness and weariness that encapsulates the night’s hazy glow, where “neither to Tartary nor to Arabia went the wind of the Cambridge courts” as it “lapsed dreamily in the midst of grey-blue clouds over the roofs of Newnham.”⁸⁹ There is a garden, where, “if she needed space to wander, she might find it.” Though easily mistaken for an unnamed college student given the title’s announcement of its setting, the “she” that “needed space to wander” is the unseeable, formless wind. Not only does Woolf personify and gender the wind as female, but she aligns its characteristics so close to those of the college women that, at times, they become indistinguishable from one another. Both “her face” and the “women’s face” were “blank,

⁸⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (San Diego, C.A.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1972), 111.

⁸⁹ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 6.

featureless,” though the wind could “gaze” while the women’s “eyelids” were “white over eyes.” The wind “lapsed dreamily” while the women did as well, since they “slept.”⁹⁰ From here, we understand the title’s “from outside” refers to the wind’s perspective. But as Woolf draws the women and wind so intricately intertwined, as if their distinctions collapse into one another, the women also, then, have a perspective “from outside” – their outsider’s perspective registered by their a view from the margins of the story, from their lives, from male dominated-institutions like academia, and eventually, from *Jacob’s Room*.

The women’s presence alone challenges the rules that restrict them to the margins, or allow them to stay there. Woolf sets the sound of their laughter against the sound of the clock, as “soft laughter came from behind a door” while “a prim-voiced clock struck,” and if “the clock were issuing his commands, they were disregarded.”⁹¹ As women’s laughter breaks the rules, it pulverizes what orders their life: clock-time. They disregard the temporal ordering principle that structures their lives, abandoning the standard, that which accounts for and tracks linear forward progression – that which charts narrative. The male clock recalls the previous female gendering of the wind, and because the wind and the women are at times indistinct, Woolf simultaneously sets the clock – sets time – against the women.⁹² The gendering serves as a leveling effect that conflates not only the influence but the associated responsibilities of each. Judith Butler similarly points to transgressive effects of resistance that laughter produces, suggesting that because a

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 7.

⁹² In her early essay, “The Value of Laughter” (1905), which she wrote in her college-age years at 23, Woolf assigns “pure laughter” to “silly women.” This “pure laughter” is “in disrepute,” she explains, as “it is held to be the voice of folly and frivolity inspired neither by knowledge or emotion,” for it “gives no message, conveys no information; it is an inarticulate utterance” and seen by many as “beneath the dignity of a race that has made itself a language to express itself thus.” She argues, however, that laughter is one of the “things that are beyond words and not beneath them.” Here she insists on the power of laughter’s potential, and associates laughter with what is overlooked and disregarded: women. I suggest that the laughter in this short story expands beyond Woolf’s argument for reevaluating laughter as a response by instrumentalizing the laughter as a transgressive force of suspension. See: Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 1:58-60.

laughing body is a body “out of control and out of breath, the body reacts to certain demands that disorganize and dismantle a socially functional self, affecting a strike against functionalism.”⁹³ In choosing the laughter, the women choose the wind, they choose themselves suspended in the night, rendering unnecessary the function of the outside world’s time and narrative.

While the expression of joy is significant as the force exempting them from rules, I’m interested in the *sound* of laughter. Sound can appear and disappear all in the same instant. Focusing on the atmospheric, intangible, and unstructured quality of sound, Woolf emblazons it with an expansiveness that has the power to render systems of order defunct, and it “gently waft[s] over the hours, rules, and discipline.”⁹⁴ Elsewhere in Woolf’s work, particularly in *Jacob’s Room*, expressions of unhappiness and frustrations with one’s confinement are met with laughter. Recall how Woolf introduces Florinda with her declaration: “I’m so frightfully unhappy!” immediately preceding “shouts of laughter” that “came from the others – high; low, some before, others after” (*JR* 70-71). Her unhappiness is met with the sounds of remote and unidentified laughter. The experience of sound prefaces the temporal description of it as “some before, others after.” By including such an obvious and vague description, Woolf liberates linear sequence as the natural, conventional structure; if it *needs* to be described, couldn’t there be something else? Some other way of experiencing sequentiality? The college women laugh, in part, after one of them explains that she “saw” an unnamed girl “slipping in by the back gate with that old hat on,” saying that “they don’t want us to know.” Angela responds by asking, “they?” and then immediately answering with her clarification: “she.” Woolf concludes the dialogue by writing “then the laughter.”⁹⁵ While the girl who slips past goes unnamed, in *Jacob’s Room* Florinda dons a “conical white hat of a perriot” during the fire and wears it through the

⁹³ Butler, “Out of Breath,” lecture, Hemispheric Institute.

⁹⁴ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

night (*JR* 70). Even when she becomes sick, while Clara sleeps and Mrs. Durrant reads, the hat remains with her: “Still wearing the conical white hat of a pierrot, Florinda was sick” (*JR* 73). If we follow Florinda’s hat and the disparate laughs, this unnamed girl in the short story plausibly emerges as Florinda. The untethered Florinda floats through *Jacob’s Room* with only half a name, and in tracing her hat and the laughter, she drifts out of the confines of the novelistic form into this short story without any name at all. Her unhappiness, and her acceptance of this unhappiness, shuttles her out of the novel to then again re-enter it; it allows her to occupy two narrative spaces, even if she only exists in the shorter piece as evening gossip – as something that is just in the air. The women, then, exist in *Jacob’s Room* as Florinda exists in “A Woman’s College from Outside” – as the air of voices, as that midnight laughter that came from “high; low, some before, others after” (*JR* 71). After all, their laughter “floated out much like the mist” and “blew freely out into the open.”⁹⁶ That laughter, which follows Florinda’s declaration of frightful unhappiness, is their laughter.

Laughter adheres to frustration and constriction, standing in relief to the anxiety it causes for these kinds of untethered women particularly in scenes at night, including *To the Lighthouse’s* Lily Briscoe in a passage laced with resistance to marriage that prefaces a moment tinged with sapphic longing. Lily recalls sitting at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee where “she likely took her hand for a moment” to convey that “an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” and that “there could be no disputing this.”⁹⁷ But “as the night wore on,” Lily would “urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it” for “she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself” since “she was not made for that.” And Lily decries these rules with laughter, as she “remembered” that “she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost

⁹⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 55.

hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over the destinies which she completely failed to understand” as if laughter alone could absolve her from the expected responsibility of marrying.

The sound of laughter in the night rivals the expectation of the silence that sleep enforces. Their laughter, in the case of both Lily Briscoe and the college women, harmonizes with the natural and free. In *To the Lighthouse* “some bird chirped in the garden” and in “A Woman’s College from Outside,” “when they laughed together a bird chirped in its sleep out in the garden.”⁹⁸ During these queer moments of being, laughter and tiredness get scripted together, creating a dreamy, delirious realm of possibility that emerges from the tension of staying up until the early morning hours, where things take on a certain hazy unreality. Woolf delivers a full confluence of the earlier aligned women and wind, through the sound of their laughter, which flies freely past the organizing structures of the women’s lives:

When they laughed together a bird chirped in its sleep out in the garden, as if the laughter –

Yes, as if the laughter (for she dozed now) floated out much like the 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 vapours 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.”⁹⁹

This laughter pulls and stretches itself onto another line, into another paragraph, dissolving whatever difference a paragraph is supposed to represent, and this representation of inarticulate

⁹⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 55; Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

⁹⁹ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

sound formally threatens – by way of splitting open typical grammatical structures – the limits of language itself. The boundlessness and suspension that their laughter – and by extension, the women themselves – take on also threatens the night itself, as night is bound to end. Even so, the shadowy darkness that allows for visual obscurity, for secrecy and hiding, provides the circumstances necessary for these women to spring into the voluminous existence they so desire, “this laughter of mind and body floating away rules, hours,” suspending themselves from the constrictions of night and time itself, and “discipline.” Butler emphasizes laughter’s power to suspend, suggesting that when “one laughs...the body opts for temporary elation, sounding forth into another’s acoustical universe.”¹⁰⁰ The liberating limitlessness assumes a contagiousness that spreads to and through even the non-laughing, sleeping young women whom Woolf holds in contradistinction to the elderly as they “clasp the ivory rod of office” upon waking.¹⁰¹ The latter concern themselves with a reminder of materiality and tangible reassurance of their existence and position in their narrative.

Woolf locates these moments within the night’s visual obscurity, the blurry lack of clarity subsumes everything until the moment of discovery, in which the object of the moment of happiness is illuminated and brought, finally, into visibility. In “Moments of Being,” just before the kiss, “Julia Craye...seemed to emerge out of the London night” as she “kindled” and “blazed” like “a dead white star” both brilliantly present and timeless.¹⁰² Similarly, in a “house...full of children sleeping and Mrs. Ramsay listening,” Lily Briscoe “had looked up at last – there was Mrs. Ramsay...something clear as the space which the clouds at last uncover – the little space of sky which sleeps beside the moon.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Butler, “Out of Breath,” lecture, Hemispheric Institute.

¹⁰¹ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

¹⁰² Woolf, “Moments of Being,” 110, 111.

¹⁰³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 55-56.

It's not the total resistance and fight against slumber that produces these moments, but, as the description of Lily's perception of Mrs. Ramsay shows, it's the flirtation with a different state of consciousness where possibility remains limitless that fulfills the desire for disappearance, the vacillation between embodied and disembodied experience. One of the college women, "Bertha... would willingly have slept, but since night is free pasturage, a limitless field, since night is unmoulded richness, one must tunnel into its darkness."¹⁰⁴ Night as a classification of time gets made into space, as Woolf conflates the two, reducing its rigidity and structuredness. Bertha resists her desire to sleep because there's something stronger at play here – in this space that she's in, with the laughter that's being shared – there is possibility for transcendence and discovery that rivals sleep's dreams. Her conception of night appears as something to possess, as "night was shared in secret, day browsed on by the whole flock." She takes the time to look at the "mist... on the garden" as she sits "by the window (while the others played)" and "mind, body, both together, seemed blown through the air, to trail across the bushes." Her experience by the window, a free flowing experience of unity, serves as a direct explanation of what happens during the bodiless existence that dreams allow for, while teetering on the brink of consciousness. The convergence of this "mind" and "body" aren't necessarily Bertha's mind and body; or, rather, they aren't *just* Bertha's. Identities remain unextractable, but the union of two different entities are nonetheless identifiable, even in this vagueness. Their collective laughter, like the mind and body that travels across the landscape, imprinting itself in this world in the night that was "shared in secret," exemplifies Ahmed's notion that if lesbian "happiness creates a horizon, it is not one that can be shared with others" outside of those who create and experience it.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, Bertha "desired to stretch out in bed and to sleep!" for "she believed that no

¹⁰⁴ Woolf, "A Woman's," 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 109.

one felt her desire for sleep; she believed humbly – sleepily – with sudden nods and lurchings, that other people were wide awake.”¹⁰⁶ Bertha registers sleep as a way to channel her unknown longing, as a desire to allow the subconscious mind to take over reflects a longing for the unknown, for an alternative narrative that is unexpected yet nonetheless dealt. Bertha’s conviction that her perpetual tiredness lies in contrast to everyone else’s constant state of being “wide awake” perhaps indicates the feeling that coats a life before experiencing what Angela discovers at the story’s close, before she experiences her gay awakening.

A brief moment of happiness, manifested by an interruption of sapphic encounters, serve as a way to “wake up” to a new world of what is possible, of what happiness there can be. Angela “had been talking” to Alice Avery when suddenly, Alice “kissed her,” after which she “roamed up and down the room” even “throwing her arms out to relieve this excitement, this astonishment at the incredible stooping of the miraculous tree with the golden fruit at its summit.”¹⁰⁷ Angela wonders, “hadn’t it dropped into her arms?” She “held it glowing to her breast, a thing not to be touched, thought of, or spoken about, but left to glow there,” for “how could she express it?” Having suspended themselves in time, broken rules and conventions, they resist their narratives, temporarily, their most vibrant moments of aliveness happening while the rest of the world sleeps, taking “death in small doses,” as sleep is described in *Orlando*.¹⁰⁸ Angela’s moment of being exemplifies how “lesbian desires move us sideways...as we come into contact with different bodies and worlds,” a kind of “contact” that “involves following rather different lines of connection, association and even exchange, as lines that are often invisible to others.”¹⁰⁹ The invisibility of the laughter, the wind, the mingling and traveling of the mind and

¹⁰⁶ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 7.

¹⁰⁷ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

¹⁰⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Orlando, FL: Harvest Book/Harcourt, 2006), 50.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 105-106.

body, the darkness and limitlessness of night establishes the circumstances for the exquisite slip into disappearance where rules and structures crumble, momentarily at least, and women can inhabit and embody the invisible narratives and possibilities. Angela finds herself confronting a “new world,” and as Ahmed articulates, “it is not surprising that becoming a lesbian can feel like a whole world gets opened up.”¹¹⁰ Thus, “lesbian desire can hence be rethought as a space for action,” and, as symbolized by the women’s laughter, “a way to extend differently into space.”¹¹¹

Angela tried to sleep, but the kiss left her unable to “close her eyes,” as “something irresistibly unclosed them.”¹¹² The moment of elation, this “moment of being” reflects Woolf’s personal understanding of her own moment seeing the flower as coming into a “satisfaction” and a “discovery”: Angela “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” to “the window” where she looked at the mist upon the garden with “all the windows open.”¹¹³ There was “one fiery-bluish, something murmuring in the distance, the world of course.” This story, like Ahmed’s description of “lesbian desires,” enacts “the coming-out story as a story of ‘coming to,’ of arriving near other bodies, as a contact that makes a story and opens up other ways of facing the world,” as Angela’s kiss moves her, “coming to” the window to face the new, good world she has found.”¹¹⁴

I do not want to suggest that embracing queerness, or turning to queerness, delivers the promise of happiness, that actual happiness lies in the alternative narrative of lesbian love. To erect a queer utopian ideal of happiness like that is an oversimplification that would define and promote queerness as a mere reproduction of heteronormative structures and narratives. I emphasize the removal of this chapter as underscoring the danger of defining a life simply in

¹¹⁰ Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward,” 564.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

¹¹³ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 71; Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 9.

¹¹⁴ Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward,” 564; Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 9.

relation and contrast to the dominant expectations, creating a distance from the idea that “queer happiness involves an increasing proximity to social forms that are already attributed as happiness-causes (the family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness).”¹¹⁵ The women’s indistinguishable, intangible, and diaphanous laughter – the primary staging instrument of the story’s action – emblemizes the very crux of the issue that is defining an imagined alternative model to follow.

I turn to more laughter in Woolf’s later novel, *The Years*, and Peggy’s rivaling elation and contention, her frustrated approach to how she might materialize its glittering, restorative, effects and fix them to something more definite, more permanent. At a party among her company, “she laughed, laughed, laughed; she could not help laughing.”¹¹⁶ “But,” Woolf writes, “her laughter had some strange effect on her. It had relaxed her, enlarged her. She felt, or rather, she saw, not a place, but a state of people, in which real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole, cast, and free. But how could she say it?” Like Angela who questioned “how” she “could express” the moment, Peggy felt as though she discovered something.¹¹⁷ Peggy “wanted to express” something “about a world in which people were whole, in which people were free... But they were laughing; she was serious.”¹¹⁸ And when the others stopped laughing to hear her speak, “they had stopped at the wrong moment” and, knowing this, Peggy accepted her inability to convey her meaning. Her sentences stumbled through ellipses until she finally “stopped.” Woolf explores Peggy’s reflections on her failure to articulate what she saw and felt:

There was the vision still, but she had not grasped it. She had broken off only a little fragment of what she meant to say, and she had made her brother angry. Yet

¹¹⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 112.

¹¹⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, 389-390.

¹¹⁷ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8.

¹¹⁸ Ellipsis is Woolf’s.

there it hung before her, the thing she had seen, the thing she had not said. But as she fell back with a jerk against the wall, she felt relieved of some oppression; her heart thumped; her veins on her forehead stood out. She had not said it, but she had tried to say it.¹¹⁹

The thing she sees, the thing she did not say, is nothing more than a moment; the atmosphere, and to pin it down into words that would rally the others behind her message about a free and happy world where moments like this slide right into each other, ceaselessly and seamlessly, is impossible. Butler emphasizes the inability to explain laughter, its meaning or greater significance, arguing that “we cannot isolate the emotion from the laughter itself” and that it is a “cognitive fallacy” to believe that “such embodied reactions can be translated into thoughts and statements effectively and exhaustively.”¹²⁰ Peggy’s inability to relay her meaning, to even grasp it in ways that would allow her to possess it for longer than her momentary experience of it, should not be understood as an obstacle that needs conquering through language and ideology. When language’s force, whose false precision we overly depend on, disappears, the very absence of an answer allows us to reevaluate the worth of what cannot take shape or adhere to rules and convention, but is, instead, of the atmosphere, like silence and laughter.

In an attempt to dispense with the idea that queer happiness should reside near, if not imitate, heteronormative social forms and values, Sara Ahmed calls for the questioning of “whether a queer definition of love might want to separate love from happiness,” and so often, this love is understood as and by longing.¹²¹ We see this in Lily Briscoe’s reckoning, as she wrestles with defining what it is that she wants from Mrs. Ramsay, what it is that she’s after,

¹¹⁹ Woolf, *The Years*, 391.

¹²⁰ Butler, “Out of Breath,” lecture, Hemispheric Institute.

¹²¹ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 103.

asking herself, “was it wisdom? Was it knowledge?”¹²² As she sat “on the floor with her arms around Mrs. Ramsay’s knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions.” Lily wondered if there is an “art” or “device” through which she could press “through into those secret chambers,” perhaps “the body” could “achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain” or “heart” what she desired. She asks, “could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?” In posing the question to herself, she realizes that “it was not knowledge but unity that she desired” for it was “nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge.” In the original manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*, this passage instead begins: “Was it tiredness? Was it knowledge?”¹²³ Woolf writes in the margins next to it: “or the word did not exist.” Though “tiredness” disappears from the text to be crossed out and “wisdom” placed over it, I like the idea that wisdom emerged from tiredness, that tiredness, even the word “tiredness,” produces something. Woolf’s change may allow us to treat tiredness and wisdom as interchangeable. If Lily wanted tiredness, and because it was “unity that she desired...but intimacy itself, which is knowledge” then the lapsed consciousness of sleep, the edges of distinctions between day and night, reflect that shadowy area in which these women reside, or yearn to reside: undefinable, a moment which can change at any moment.¹²⁴ Even Peggy, after “she had tried to say it” – to express the moment in words – “did not want to move, or to speak.” “She wanted, Woolf writes, “to rest, to lean, to dream,” for “she felt very tired.”¹²⁵ Angela’s

¹²² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 56.

¹²³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick (London, England: Hogarth Press, 1983), 90.

¹²⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 56.

¹²⁵ Woolf, *The Years*, 391.

queer moment, her moment of love, stands in contrast to Peggy's party, and before she even wonders how she might express it, Angela simply "held it glowing to her breast," and like Lily, Angela knew that it was "a thing not to be touched, thought of, or spoken about, but left to glow there."¹²⁶

Though the desire is an indistinguishable intimacy, a convergence, Lily does not see this come to fruition – and it is in this realization that I do not locate failure but the conjuncture at which we can reframe happiness. In the beginning of the very next paragraph, Woolf writes, "Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee."¹²⁷ However, Lily "knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart," but wondered how one knows "one thing or another about people, sealed up as they were" (57). Ahmed offers Simone Weil's definition of "love as a queer definition," where "queer love might involve happiness only by insisting that such happiness is *not* what is shared."¹²⁸ Weil:

Love on the part of someone who is happy is the wish to share the suffering of the beloved who is unhappy. Love on the part of someone is unhappy is to be filled with joy by the mere knowledge that his beloved is happy without sharing in this happiness or even wishing to do so.¹²⁹

This definition of love, as exemplified by the scene with Lily, maintains a certain unknowability; intimacy that holds notes of inaccessibility. There will always be something unshareable, untranslatable, and it is from that unknowability that the love resides and prospers. Queerness is familiar with longing – these instances of directionless yearning, yearning untethered to a narrative that is dangerous but nonetheless a driving force – so much of the sapphic experience,

¹²⁶ Woolf, "A Woman's," 8.

¹²⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 57.

¹²⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise*, 100.

¹²⁹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, [1953] 2002), 63. Quoted in Ahmed, *The Promise*, 100.

especially before realization of the desire, arrives this way, absolutely present but indiscernible: Angela asks, “how could she express it?”; Lily wanted “nothing that could be written in any language known to men.”¹³⁰ Woolf suggests what Ahmed proposes, and what I quoted earlier, that because “queer moments” are where “things come out of line, are fleeting,” then “our response need not be to search for permanence,” but “to listen to the sound of the ‘what’ that fleets.”¹³¹ Lily listens to the intangible, elusive “what” that fleets: “Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people.”¹³² Woolf ties sleep back to this sort of longing and disappearance, “for days there hung about her, as after a dream some subtle change is felt in the person one has dreamt of, more vividly than anything she said, the sound of murmuring.” Angela guided “herself to the window” where “one fiery-bluish, something murmuring in the distance, the world of course.”¹³³ If the queer moment can hold the world, and the queer world is a world that fleets and disappears, the atmospheric, indistinct but riveting murmuring in the distance represents and holds the world; is the moment; illuminates the happiness of a moment, the transitory joy that comes and goes: “Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away, a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet.”¹³⁴ It becomes about approaching whatever unnamed, unknown possibility resides in the absence – that same “gaiety” and “inconsequence” that emerges as Woolf approaches her new experimental form with a “light spirited stepping at [her] sweet will.”¹³⁵ Inhabiting the world in this way requires a willingness to untether oneself, to hover between and to disappear into

¹³⁰ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 8; Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 56.

¹³¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 106.

¹³² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 57.

¹³³ Woolf, “A Woman’s,” 9.

¹³⁴ Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward,” 566.

¹³⁵ Woolf, *The Diary Vol. II*, 14.

both the gloom of tears and the rapturous gaiety of laughter, and to know that that disappearance isn't a loss – for that absence is atmosphere, is the place to be out of place and in a moment's possibility.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have examined how Virginia Woolf contends with the positionality of the ignored woman in literary history whose unhappiness unseats her from narrative and hoists her into disappearance. I have argued that Woolf's work uncovers this absence, but refuses to patch up its damage on literary history by merely filling it, or relocating these disappearing women back into our line of sight. Instead of simply including these women by taking the structural effort to accommodate the crucial element that casts them outside of narrative in the first place – their directionless longing and unhappiness – Woolf dispenses with the limitations of narrative. In *Jacob's Room*, she asks what limitless structure might arise from the discomfort of a woman's heaving sobs, asking us to turn towards what the Edwardian writers, and thus, readers, are accustomed to turning away from; she asks what possibilities might “open out” of a woman's unhappiness, but only teases this narrative potential with inconsequential female characters who vacillate between abandoning their unfulfilling position in the marriage plot and untethering their desire from narrative altogether, rather than providing a firm alternative outline. In this way, Woolf reproduces the very thing she critiques about literature, that is, this disappearance, and locates it as the site of queer possibility.

While queer possibility is in the air, it would be a mistake, however, to believe that this promises, or even signifies, blissful celebration. This position of disappearance and embrace of possibility has equally negative potential. It is the precipice that faces both the sublime and the

horrifying. Like the thin, permeable line that distinguishes laughter from tears, it is a leap into the void that shocks you into aliveness or kills you. Woolf understands this, and later, in *The Waves*, she grapples with the problem of launching oneself into the void by casting one of her characters into the air.

This moment, for Rhoda, is the moment of suicide; her leap into the air is a leap to her death. Woolf, who died by suicide, accommodates the possibility that the intense longing felt by these women to “walk out into the air” can take the form of suicidal ideation (*JR* 112). One of Woolf’s most airy and unhappy characters, Rhoda, repeatedly expresses that she has “no face.”¹³⁶ Like Florinda who has an “unanchored life,” Rhoda “flutter[s] unattached, without anchorage anywhere.” Untethered, she has “no end in view” – no narrative for her longing to attach onto.¹³⁷ While feeling suspended from time offers a freedom to those in “A Woman’s College from Outside,” it threatens Rhoda. For her, “one moment does not lead to another,” and she becomes “afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon [her], because [she] cannot deal with it as” others do – she “cannot make one moment merge in the next” because they are “all violent, all separate.”¹³⁸ The possibility of a moment of being becomes threatening. Rhoda grasps for the edges of clarity, worries over how “all palpable forms of life have failed” her,” and figures that “unless [she] can stretch and touch something hard,” she “shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever.”¹³⁹ In hoisting her characters into disappearance, Woolf recognizes the kind of launch into absence that cannot be recovered from. It’s the kind of disappearance that surpasses the issues of being seen or unseen, being inside or outside of the novel, because it is no longer a matter of writing but a matter of life and death.

¹³⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, 122.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 159

Woolf leaves us, then, with the provocation of an absence which can be produced and embraced by both tears and laughter. While tears have the potential to dissolve you along with them, they can also insist on summoning you back to the material world. The sharp salt of teardrops might sting you before they fall away, off your face, into diffusion. Your heavy breathing might not propel you into an suspended airiness, but make you more aware of how much of air's gravity keeps you inside and of the groundedness of reality, and it is in this rootedness, this full embodiment, that the tears might not dissolve you but instead, physically wrestle with your feelings of misplaced identity, a simple, frustrated expression of profound sadness.

The risk of chasing aliveness – the positive potential inside moments of being – requires an acceptance of terror, a recognition of unhappiness, a willingness to allow longing to stretch you thin and suspend you above, with the knowledge that a leap outwards can be a downward drop of finality and conclusion. It's a willingness to untether oneself from narrative, from beginnings and endings, and from certainty – the willingness to become intimate with the uncomfortably vague, the indistinguishable, to wade in the unease and exhilaration that dissipates the division of crying and laughter. It would be a mistake, however, to locate the important question here as being whether or not one can accept the idea that aliveness requires such risk. I suggest that what's important about this absence is not a question but a confrontation – to be truly awake and alive, there is no other choice.

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