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Reclaiming *Orlando*, or Why the Woolfian Legacy is Worth Fighting For

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Abstract

We are beholden to the postmodernists for their unwavering fidelity to Virginia Woolf's legacy and the resultant popularity it continues to enjoy. This should no longer be the case. As postmodernism's import is increasingly outflanked by the enterprises of Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and the resuscitated Hegel, we ought to rescue Woolf not only from the poststructuralists, but also from herself. I claim that another reading of Woolf is overdue, one which breaks with the general consensus. Such a reading is not a disproving of the latter, but rather an illumination of its concealed underside which it vehemently disavows. I use the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek to illuminate this underside in Woolf's *Orlando*, and demonstrate how Woolf shares more with Hegel and Descartes than Deleuze and his disciples. Rather than reading Woolf as a champion of connection, affectivity, and desire, we ought to read her as a writer of abstraction, negativity, and failure.

Key Words: Woolf / Hegel / Žižek / abstraction / failure / madness

Introduction

We are indebted to the postmodernists for their indefatigable insistence on the relevance of Virginia Woolf's corpus, and hence for the sustainment of its popularity. Among those thinkers, there are the classic Derrideans who read Woolf as an emblem of deconstruction, the Butlerians who celebrate the queer-feminist elements, and, of course, the Deleuzians who exalt Woolf's vision of the self as not a subject, but an individuated assemblage composed of forces, affects, and speeds, complexly intertwined with its human and more-than-human surroundings. Deleuze himself praises Woolf as not an "isolated regime of signs", but rather "a state of reigns, ages, and sexes" which continually become in conjunction with other elements they encounter and with which they converse and negotiate (Deleuze and Parnet 2007: 120). One need not strain to find the Woolfian inspirations in Deleuze's oeuvre, making literary scholars' continued emphases on their alliance rather unsurprising.

Indeed, Woolf's continued relevance is indeed indebted to these postmodern thinkers, but it is about time this debt be canceled. Why, given the waning import of these schools of thought thanks to philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and the resuscitated Hegel, has Woolf not been wrested from the postmodern grasp? Could it not be that the bright light which they cast upon her only more sharply reveals her to be something other than what they claim this light is illuminating? My claim is that the postmodernists have—though paradoxically indeed—only crystallized what she is in truth: a thinker of Cartesian subjectivity *par excellence*. I contend that Woolf, rather than celebrating connection, affectivity, and desire, is in truth a thinker of negativity and a writer scrupulously attuned to *failure*. While this claim will unquestionably seem off-kilter according to the general consensus on Woolf, I ask for the reader's patience as I present a preliminary justification as to why we ought to take such a claim seriously in the coming pages. Although I break with the conventional reading of Woolf, to a degree which Woolf herself would likely dispute, I hope to reveal something more essential to Woolf than Woolf herself and reveal her to be our contemporary.

To carry out this task, I opt for depth over breadth in terms of textual evidence, using for analysis only Woolf's *Orlando*, which happens to be one of the least critically regarded texts of her oeuvre, but, in my mind, one of the most revealing. As the basis

for my argument, I use Slavoj Žižek's Lacano-Hegelian reading of the Cartesian *cogito* as a means to not merely dispute one hermeneutical interpretation with another, but rather to immanently illuminate a deeper set of tensions and, dare I say, a *logic*, at work in Woolf's writing.

Before beginning, I will note that unlike many of Woolf's contemporary interlocutors, I pay no heed to her biographical details, the inessentiality of which makes them well suited for bedtime romance novels, but not literary criticism. Given that *Orlando* is an homage to Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West, much attention is paid to the assemblage the novel forms with her personal life; however, tuning into her quotidian affairs will not provide us Easter eggs to uncover her work's hidden secrets. On the contrary, by neglecting to read her work on its own terms, the literary critic diminishes its significance and undermines its autonomy, treating it as a cipher that cannot be cracked once and for all, rather than seeing this opacity to itself be an answer.

The Žižekian Subject

Prior to engaging with *Orlando*, it is helpful to first outline the contours of Žižek's Lacano-Hegelian reading of Cartesian subjectivity (heretofore simply referred to as Žižekian subjectivity). While a wholesale exegesis of the Žižekian subject's genesis lies outside the scope of the present paper¹, a brief overview of the aspects relevant to the ensuing discussion is in order. It is first necessary to stipulate that Žižek's import lies not in his rhetorical power to make more seductive claims than his predecessors, but rather in his Hegelian ability to locate the 'sticking point' of other systems of thought and release the conceptual movement locked up within them, enabling us to see what is eclipsed or disavowed in their steadfast maintenance of a certain position. In what follows, I aim to show not how Žižek simply proves other hermeneutical frameworks wrong, but rather how he makes explicit a disavowed, but nevertheless integral underside from which they cannot disjoin themselves.

To state it outright, the Žižekian subject is a non-substantial void, fundamentally Cartesian but in the German Idealist sense, rather than what is found in the *Meditations* themselves. The Lacanian distinction between subject of the enunciation (*sujet de*

l'énonciation) and subject of the enunciated (*sujet de l'énoncé*) is helpful tool for clarifying what is meant by this. The former is “an empty, nonsubstantial logical variable (not function), whereas the subject of the enunciated (the ‘person’) consists of the fantasmatic ‘stuff’ which fills out the void” that is the former. Emblematic of the ‘I’, or the subject (of enunciation), is precisely its *lack* of intuited content; “the inaccessibility to the I of its own ‘kernel of being’ makes it an I” (Žižek 1993: 14). The subject cannot be given to itself and necessarily remains *split* from any alien content it may come to passively accumulate. Let’s parse this out.

Žižek argues that this split (between the subject and the substantial content of both its empirical ‘self’ and its objective surroundings) is exemplified in the Kantian transcendental subject, but favours what he purports to be Hegel’s radicalization of this split. The Hegelian subject—absolutely self-relating negativity—is “nothing but the very gap which separates phenomena from the Thing, the abyss beyond phenomena conceived in its negative mode”. The subject is not on the side of the appearance nor of the thing in-itself, but rather is that which *separates* them. Further substantiating this, Žižek enjoins us to remain attentive to what Hegel really means in the *Phenomenology* when he conceives the Absolute not only as substance, but also as subject. Žižek denies the standard reading which claims the becoming-subject of substance to be exemplified by the active subject “leaving its ‘imprint’ on the substance, molding it, mediating it, expressing in it his subjective content” and making itself identical to it (Žižek 1993: 21). Žižek cautions us to avoid “elevating the subject into the grounding Principle of all reality”, for the subject is always already related to heterogeneous substantial content and thus always comes second as the content’s “negation or mediation, as its splitting or distortion” (Žižek 2013: 380). In other words, it is a site of disharmony which contingently emerges into the otherwise consistent (or at least apparently so) order of being, or substance. But this secondary emergence is a result of substance’s own inconsistency and incompleteness. That is, it emerges as the point at which substance’s self-mediation encounters an obstacle in the process of becoming one with itself. Thus, the subject is itself substance’s own very ‘non-identity’, or the impossibility of substance to fully become itself. The subject is not simply another substance, which given substance’s necessary independence simply could not be so,

but rather is its own point of inconsistency. Whereas the pre-Hegelian notions of substance, such as Spinoza's, see it to be absolutely self-identical, Hegel's assertion that substance is also subject conceives substance as necessarily split and thus, unable to be entirely self-identical. Nonetheless, the split is that which makes the dream of total self-identity itself even possible.

Žižek further explicates that once substance has been 'subjectivized' (or all that *can be has been*), "its compact In-itself dissolves into the multitude of its particular predicates-determinations, of its 'beings-for-other,' and 'subject' is that very X, the empty form of a 'container,' which remains" (Žižek 1993: 21). The subject reveals itself to be a place holder and as such—that is, as formally heterogeneous to its manifold content, or 'many selves', to anticipate what comes later—cannot be subjectivized. This remaining place holder is substance's own split. To put it another way, the subject, or the pure I, is simply the form of the 'I think' devoid of all determinate thoughts. As such, it is the coincidence of universality and singularity; it is a point of irreducible singularity insofar as it is *this* 'I', but on the other hand, absolute universality insofar as it possesses no unique predicates and cannot be differentiated from any other 'I'. I will return to this below.

One must make explicit here Žižek's sometimes convoluted distinction between subject and subjectivity. Subjectivity, put simply, corresponds to one's assimilation into a particular symbolic order—one's 'subjectivization'—and hence to the apparent self-identity it enjoys, whereas the subject, "emerges not via subjectivization-narrativization, i.e., via the 'individual myth' constructed from the decentered pieces of tradition; instead, the subject emerges *at the very moment when the individual loses its support in the network of tradition*" (Žižek 1993: 42). This subject is the formal place-holder which enables subjectivization but cannot itself be subjectivized; however, this only becomes apparent when it loses the support it does have in the 'network of tradition' (i.e. when it is neither 'natural' nor 'cultural'). Thus, the subjectivity of the 'self' (or the ego, psychoanalytically speaking) and the 'subject' are not one and the same. Any content I know *myself* to be is for this very reason, not 'I'. The 'I', or the subject, is the void, as well as the separation of itself *qua* void from its subjective content, by means of which it can reflect on its subjectivity, precisely because it *is* the very gap that separates itself

from its subjectivity. In Hegelian terms, it is its own distance from itself. Thus, an eventual reflective congruence between the self and subject at which point total self-identity is achieved is effectively impossible (this will become clearer later when I introduce Hegel himself on the notion of identity). However, it is this very impossibility which generates the illusion that it might be overcome. On this note, Žižek is aligned with the postmodernists in their opposition to (self-)identity; however, rather than taking an antithetical position and absolutizing difference or heralding ‘fluidity’ instead, Žižek is interested in what constitutes the very opposition *between* identity and difference.

The crux of the matter is that, as Žižek notes, the subject “can never fully ‘become himself,’ he can never fully realize himself” (Žižek 1992: 181). While such yearning to ‘become oneself’, to become fully self-identical, may bring to the individual an interminable sense of failure, a subtle shift in perspective demonstrates to us that this failure is not something to be castigated and eventually overcome through more rigorous self-reflection. Rather, this failure *is* the subject itself, positively understood. The subject is in fact only its incongruence with itself and it is this very incongruence which enables it to envision an eventual overcoming of it; however, such an overcoming would not be a final achievement for the subject, but rather its very negation, for the subject is only this very gap of negativity separating substance from its subjectivity.

To return to my previous note, it is for this reason that the subject is universal, which is precisely where Žižek departs from the postmodernists and reveals the overarching paradox of their logic. Universality, Žižek proposes, “inscribes itself into a particular identity as its inability to fully become itself ... this is why the modern universal subject is by definition ‘out of joint’, lacking its proper place in the social edifice”, or unable to be inscribed as such into any symbolic order (Žižek 2013: 362). The universality is not just a rupture into the particular but is the point of blockage which prevents the particular from becoming entirely self-identical. Only because the subject is necessarily out of joint with the order in which it finds itself is it universal. Put simply, its failure to become ‘fully integrated’ and at home with itself, as it were, is precisely the proof of its universality. Different particular identities are only possible because of the universality by which they are all indelibly stained. They share not some common

transcendental ground to which they are all spiritually tethered even if they do not know it, but rather this abiding antagonistic *form*.

With this, however, one must be discerning enough so as not to mistake the subject for a pure neutral universal medium which can be filled with any contingent particular content, regardless of the milieu within which it is embedded, for this would be to lapse into a vulgar formalism. It remains accurate to refer to it as a 'place holder', but as Žižek proclaims, "if we are to attain self-consciousness, the empty universality of the 'bearer' has to assume actual existence, it has to be posited as such, i.e., *the subject has to relate to itself, to conceive of itself, as (to) an empty 'bearer,' and to perceive his empirical features which constitute the positive content of his particular 'person' as a contingent variable*" (Žižek 1993: 29, italics original). This is not to say that the subject can ever be free of particularity; however, it must relate to its particularities as what 'it' is *not*. To one-sidedly argue in favour of particularity, as the postmodernists do, is to disavow the universality traversing all particulars.

To back this up, Žižek solicits Hegel's claim vis-à-vis the Absolute Idea that the concept is a "free subjective concept that is for itself and therefore possesses *personality*—the practical, objective concept determined in and for itself which, as person, is impenetrable atomic subjectivity" (Hegel 1989: 824).² This atomic subjectivity is the void of negativity that is the *cogito* and underpins all positive properties. The implications of soliciting this Hegelian statement are such that we must regard the modern subject as not something existent only in theory, but as an actually existing abstraction.³ It comes to be for-itself as this living abstraction, or abstractive *process*, and it is this crux which will come to justify the claim I am here putting forth about *Orlando*.

A Descent into Madness

Woolf's *Orlando* is widely acclaimed as a literary classic that dramatizes, but also serves as an inspiration for, poststructuralist themes such as the performativity of identity, decentred subjectivity, and anti-dualism. Notwithstanding, a more attuned reading reveals something which destabilizes the general consensus vis-à-vis both *Orlando* and Woolf's corpus as a whole, although I leave it to someone else to draw out

the implications as they pertain to her other works. *Orlando: A Biography*, published in 1928, Woolf's fifth novel, is written as a love letter to Vita Sackville-West. It chronicles, from the perspective of a voyeuristic biographer, the life of an individual—Orlando—whose childhood begins in Elizabethan England, but who travels over 300 years in the novel's development, only aging 36 years in the process. While there are remarkable implications for thinking time and history in the novel, I here confine myself only to its implications apropos of subjectivity.

The reader first meets Orlando as a young male page in the court of Elizabeth I, with whom he has a favourable, somewhat romantic rapport. The boy, clumsy and absent-minded, is “none of those who tread lightly the corantoe and lavolta” (Woolf 1995: 16⁴). “All his images”, we are told, “were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy” (*Orlando*: 17). Orlando is a volatile, as exemplified by his incessant oscillation between interest and boredom, contentment and restlessness, enchantment and melancholy. The reader is at times made aware of a degree of complexity animating Orlando's inner world, even if only nascent, such as the characterization of his mind as a confused “welter of opposites”, though not yet imbued with the dialectical tension he will later exhibit (*Orlando*: 10). Notwithstanding, the reader primarily encounters him dreaming “only of the pleasures of life” (*Orlando*: 23) and doing “as nature bade him to” (*Orlando*: 12), all the while assuming the symbolic mandates imposed upon him by the Elizabethan milieu in which he, in his *given* being, finds himself.

Not far into the novel, Orlando endures a disruptive series of events, including a lustful encounter with a Russian princess named Sasha against the backdrop of the Great Frost of 1608.⁵ Soon into their relationship, Orlando learns of Sasha's adulterous behaviour, which leaves him distraught. Sasha assures him that what he saw was not what it looked like, prompting a reconciliation. They vow to meet at the Thames that night and escape London together; however, when midnight comes, Sasha does not. Rather than continuing his romantic fantasy, Orlando witnesses Sasha float away from England on a ship without him, causing him to descend into madness. Soon after, Orlando is exiled from court and retires into solitude at his country house, where he “lay as if in a trance” (*Orlando*: 31), takes “strange delight in thoughts of death and decay”

(*Orlando*: 33), and begins having difficulty remembering his life prior. Orlando sinks into illness and automatism which lasts several months, during which he reads for hours daily and writes *The Oak Tree*. Orlando eventually emancipates himself from this feverish stupor and re-establishes contact with the outer world, only to soon again relapse following a conversation with literary critic Nicholas Greene. Orlando is disillusioned by the latter's condemnation, or one might say, *misrecognition*, of his writing and his implicit disputation of Orlando's self-nomination as "the first poet of his race" (*Orlando*: 50).

In the novel's crucial moment vis-à-vis the argument I am bringing forth, Orlando gives way to the notion of *obscurity*, and emerges *for-himself qua* subject. It is worth quoting the passage here in full:

'Fame' [Orlando] said, 'is like ... a braided coat which hampers the limbs; a jacket of silver which curbs the heart; a painted shield which covers a scarecrow,' etc. etc. The pith of his phrases was that while fame impedes and constricts, obscurity wraps about a man like a mist ... obscurity lets the mind take its way unimpeded. Over the obscure man is poured the merciful suffusion of darkness. None knows where he comes or goes (*Orlando*: 50).

Orlando finds delight in the process of depersonalization and the anonymity with which it endows him and succumbs to what one can designate in anticipation of Žižek's terminology, *the abyss of freedom*.

Orlando, or Pure Separation for-Itself

Let us stop here to map what has come before, for it is only what I have thus far summarized that is significant to my claim. As I see it, the moment of Orlando's retreat into solitude after Sasha's departure and the moment at which he becomes enamoured by obscurity constitute the novel's two most significant junctures. Up until his retreat into solitude, Orlando unreflectively assumes his role in the symbolic fabric of Elizabethan England. He finds the world given to him in all its sensuous immediacy; however, his retirement into solitude after enduring the loss of his lover, in whom he implicitly begins to find himself as more than simply *given*, is a moment of contraction from the order with

which he hitherto finds himself at one, even if he is not explicitly aware of this oneness at the time. Just before witnessing Sasha float away, Orlando, in his quest along the Thames after she has not shown up to escape, is confronted with “inhuman groanings” and is swept away by “blind instinct” (*Orlando*: 29). Orlando begins a descent into madness or, what is the same, experiences a *wiping of the slate* and is purged of his subjective content. Upon realizing his loss, Orlando returns into himself. After having externalized himself in Sasha and then losing this externality, Orlando finds himself in this very return to be emptied of content and hence out of joint with the symbolic order he once uncritically identified with.

To return to Žižek, the event which causes a ‘wiping of the slate’, when the individual loses its support in the symbolic network, coincides with the genesis of the subject. Or, what is the same, ‘wiping of the slate’ is *itself* the emergence of the subject qua void of negativity, which Žižek, following Hegel, refers to as “the night of the world”. Žižek proclaims there to be an “ontological necessity” to madness, which “lies in the fact that it is not possible to pass directly from the purely ‘animal soul’ immersed in its natural life-world to ‘normal’ subjectivity dwelling in its symbolic universe. The ‘vanishing mediator’ between the two is the ‘mad’ gesture of radical withdrawal from reality which opens up the space for its symbolic (re)constitution” (Žižek 2008b: 37). This juncture between the two stages which Žižek designates the ‘vanishing mediator’ is but another name for the Freudian death drive (Žižek 2008b: 38). The death drive for Žižek is not simply an intrusive instinct that impels one to self-destruct, but rather names the “transformation of the being of man in the sense of a *derangement* of his position among beings”. This withdrawal is not a retreat into a tranquil abyss, or something like a Heideggerian clearing, but rather a violent *tearing apart* of a seemingly consistent lifeworld. It is itself the “deranged/twisted withdrawn *foundation* of the horizon of the Clearing itself” (Žižek 2008a: 74).

This is precisely Orlando’s experience along the Thames just before he glimpses Sasha drifting away. Again, he is there said to be “past reasoning” and driven by “blind instinct” as he mounts his horse and gallops madly down the river. Although one might object that because he becomes driven by such an instinct, Orlando is determined by his natural impulses, if one reads instinct *qua* withdrawal, in the Žižekian sense of the

death drive, a different meaning emerges which is retroactively confirmed by what follows. As Orlando trots down the river, dawn breaks, at which point he is confronted with the breaking of the Frost. The biographer writes (of course, metaphorizing Orlando's psyche) that "[t]he river had gained its freedom in the night. It was as if a sulphur spring ... had risen from the volcanic regions beneath and burst the ice asunder with such vehemence that it swept the huge and massy fragments furiously apart" (*Orlando*: 29). While the standard reading of the latter passage would place the emphasis on *what* erupts, whether this be 'the repressed', 'the Real', 'pure life', and so forth, I claim on the contrary that one must withdraw even further and realize its significance not to lie in the eruption of some inhuman (but ostensibly self-identical) substance, but rather in the very *tearing apart* of the substance itself, of unsettling its apparent consistency and enabling an 'eruption' at all. This moment reveals Orlando to be the very excess of substance, "the externality of substance to itself", distorting substance and therein finding himself as its very derangement (Žižek 1993: 30). With this change of perspective, we see that what appears as an eruption, the utter dismemberment of substance, is only substance's encounter with itself *qua* subject.

As already stated, when Orlando soon after renounces his position in the court and retreats to his country home, he lays "as if in a trance" for seven days. Upon awakening, the reader learns that "some change, it was suspected, must have taken place in the chambers of his brain, for though he was perfectly rational and seemed graver and more sedate in his ways than before, he appeared to have an imperfect recollection of his past life" (*Orlando*: 31). It is not tenable to suppose that what Orlando experienced was a mere blip in the road which, despite its experiential gravity, could be unproblematically assimilated into his otherwise coherent, linear life narrative or with which he might eventually come to terms and find himself again in continuity with his environs. Rather, such an event and Orlando's resultant trauma represents a cut in his life and will prove, as will become obvious in what follows, to be a cut which instructs the remainder of his existence, after which nothing will again be the same.

Orlando eventually attempts to reinstall himself into the symbolic fabric from which he has just contracted in his aspiration to become "the first poet of his race", but this attempt, much like his failure to 'attain' Sasha, also ends in failure. Although one

might argue that the following instance in which Nicholas Greene stamps out Orlando's dream of becoming such a figure, and Orlando's subsequent fall into 'obscurity' is the real 'wiping of the slate', we should refuse this objection and look a little closer. This scenario merely *repeats* the previous instance of contraction; however, it is only with this repetition that what may have initially appeared to be the traumatic result of an erroneous contingency is affirmed as a necessary, intractable truth.

It behooves us here to recall the classic Žižekian aphorism that "truth can only emerge second, as a *repeated error*" and affirm that this second moment of loss sediments Orlando's status *qua* subject (Žižek 2013: 380). That is to say, it is not simply that Orlando coincidentally encounters two traumatic instances that could have been otherwise, making the result of this second encounter just another unfortunate contingency. Should Greene, instead of disputing Orlando's self-described genius, have affirmed it, one is tempted to claim that this would have been equally traumatic for Orlando, despite that it is, at the time, what he consciously believes he desires himself to be recognized as. As a result of his initial descent into madness, Orlando is already 'in-himself' subject, past the point of return. Despite his desire to be recognized as what he believes himself to be, he has already been exposed (to us) as a sheer point of negativity, of abstraction from all predication by which he was previously determined. Greene's *misrecognition*, as it were, reveals Orlando to be a pure failure of identification, or the 'abyss of freedom' not governed by any identitarian mandates.

A small detour through Hegel can be of much help to clarify this situation's (onto-)logic. For Hegel, "identity consists in being *separation* as such, or in being essential *in separation*, that is, it is *nothing for itself* but is a moment of separation" (Hegel 1989: 414). Any act of identification, whether it identifies a thing, a historical phenomenon, or a person, is necessarily iterative and in such iteration, even if it is believed to be a mere reduplication of what is being identified, otherness is unavoidably introduced. Put another way, the law of identity, $A=A$, requires the first A's reduplication to assert its identity with itself. The redoubled A is nonetheless *different* from the first, even if it is just another A that, to common sense, appears the same as the first. Because of this, all we gain from identification claims are the knowledge that identity is nothing but the impossibility of something to be purely self-identical, as it has otherness bound up with

it. Identity does not consist in the commonalities shared by each A on either side of the equation, but rather in the gap between them, which is the moment of separation, but also (negative) unification. Thus, as Hegel claims, identity “instead of being in its own self truth and absolute truth ... is the passage beyond itself into the dissolution of itself” (Hegel 1989: 415). Any identification in its very utterance reveals itself to be marked by an internal diremption, or ‘split’ as Žižek refers to it.

As a result, one can claim with certainty that were Orlando to be exalted by Green as “the first poet of his race”, given what he already is ‘in-himself’ *qua* a point of pure negativity, this would have been equally traumatic, still causing him to fall into obscurity. Whether affirmed and ‘recognized’ or repudiated as he is, neither designation would adequately describe him *qua* subject. He is in-himself a point of separation from predication, a point of pure negativity to which nothing can ‘stick’, and hence cannot be fully equivalent to any ascribed signifying label. The truth of Orlando is neither $A(=A)$ nor $(A=)A$, but simply the gap dividing them.

The significance of Orlando’s reaction to Greene’s dismissive attitude is not his immediate anger caused by what seems in the first instance to be an unfortunate misrecognition, but rather the fact that he becomes *for himself* what he already is. Recalling Žižek’s earlier-cited claim, “*the subject has to relate to itself, to conceive of itself, as (to) an empty ‘bearer,’ and to perceive his empirical features which constitute the positive content of his particular ‘person’ as a contingent variable*” (Žižek 1993: 29). Here, followed by his descent into obscurity, Orlando finally relates to himself as such negativity. The remainder of Orlando’s life will consist of his attempts to give body to this negativity, and continually affirm himself as subject via his own failures to be successful in so doing.

Obscurity: Vitalist Flux or Night of the World?

It is Orlando’s fall into obscurity which represents the real element which must be defended from the postmodernists, particularly those of the posthumanist/vitalist tradition. Although I do not insinuate the latter to be an undifferentiated agglomerate, they certainly share a common set of assumptions. I use Deleuze and his successors here in a synecdochic way to mount such a defense (namely because of the affinity

between him and Woolf which I mentioned previously) and hope that in so doing, the implications vis-à-vis other postmodern traditions might become evident. Orlando does indeed embrace obscurity, which is conducive to the Deleuzians' claims that Orlando exemplifies 'becoming-imperceptible'—in other words, Orlando exemplifies a dissolution of his human superiority and immerses himself into the univocal flux of being. While, however, Orlando's pursuant trajectory certainly exemplifies destabilization as such, it does so not because he is immersed in the univocal flux of pure life which is traversed by intensities and speeds, in which affects are experienced vividly, and polymorphous assemblages are joyfully produced. On the contrary, it does so because Orlando is himself the point of impossibility of identity. Indeed, Orlando herein experiences depersonalization (better written as *de-person-alization*, insofar as 'person' designates the substantial wealth of the Self, in opposition to its status as subject), but not in such a way that enables him to experience *more* affects and intensities in their immediacy, to experience himself as more *complexly* predicated, but as a failure to fully realize any experience or predication at all. The *de-person-alization* associated with his lapse into obscurity may well wrest Orlando out of his uncritically assumed particularity insofar as it frees him from attachment to predication, but one should not confuse this abyssal freedom with the capacity to more richly experience the plenitude of his environs without being confined to the stringent limits of 'society' or 'binaries'.

Rosi Braidotti's account of *Orlando* is thoroughly informed by Virginia Woolf's biographical data—particularly her relation to Sackville-West, chronicled in Woolf's diary entries. Nonetheless, one claim Braidotti—whose position I do not intimate to represent the entire postmodern account of Woolf, but nonetheless serves as a useful conversation partner here in making this argument explicit—makes apropos of *Orlando* gives us insight to her interpretation of the text itself. She states (implicitly referring to the moment currently under scrutiny) that “[a] depersonalization of the self, in a gesture of everyday transcendence of the ego, is a connecting force, a binding force that links the self to larger internal and external relations. An isolated vision of the individual is of hindrance to such a process” (Braidotti 2006: 197). As she sees it, Woolf provides Deleuze with the framework for what he terms the 'plane of immanence', a field imperceptible to unitary subjectivity “where different elements can encounter one

another, producing those assemblages of forces without which there is no becoming” (Braidotti 2006: 189-190). Thus, to Braidotti, Orlando’s ‘becoming-obscure’ brings him to this plane of immanence on which his life is vivified, on which he experiences not ‘himself’, but ‘his selves’, as a dispersed, unstable multiplicity. Orlando is no longer a unitary subject, but an assemblage and, as such, cannot be disarticulated from others (including the more-than-human and inanimate objects).

Adrian Johnston perspicaciously summarizes one of Žižek’s quintessential insights, already implicit in the preceding exegesis, which is instructive here: “The more one insists upon subjectivity as a dispersed multitude of shifting and unstable identity-constructs, the more one is confronted with the necessity of positing ... a formal void, as the backdrop against which the ‘mad dance of identification’ takes place” (Johnston 2008: 11). Vis-à-vis Deleuze and Braidotti apropos of their philosophical relationship to Woolf, we may indeed agree with them that dispersion can take place in terms of one’s substantial content, destabilizing binaries and breaking up the unitary ‘Self’ into many “larval selves”, as Deleuze refers to them in *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze 1994: 78); however, this is only possible against the backdrop of the void that is the subject, the blank tablet on which they can be impressed and form such a palimpsest. Put simply, ‘I’ can only experience myself as ‘many’ and continually ensure my multiple-composition, preventing my re-congealment into a unitary ‘person’, insofar as ‘I’ am the singular place holder in which all of these selves can be hosted.

Corroborating such a perspective is the fact Orlando only experiences himself as possessing a plurality of selves after his bout of madness has occurred. Without this moment of abstraction, of finding himself to be out of joint with his surroundings can he become such a multiplicity, which is nonetheless superficial to his status *qua* subject. Put another way, only because Orlando has ‘torn apart’ the milieu in which he exists can he be aware of the discrete entities which populate it and how they might enter into connections with one another with him and ‘become’. Such becoming is not a return to some prior natural immediate harmony which definitively pre-exists the world he tears apart, but rather only appears because of his work *qua* subject, prior to which there is only undifferentiated, lifeless mush. The emergence of the subject creates the illusion that there was a prior consistent unity, which it might aim to piece back together and

with which he might find himself again 'at one'. This illusion is only generated because of the irreparable separation that has occurred and made *identity*, or merely the connection *between* two elements as is implicit in the notion of identity, seem viable.

I do not deny the seductiveness of the vitalist/new-materialist interpretation of *Orlando* proposed by Braidotti, as well as Ryan (2013) and Fraser (2020), given that the state of obscurity into which Orlando immerses himself pre-emptively rehearses the logic underpinning the standard reading of the Deleuzian plane of immanence—"the intersection of all concrete forms" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 251). The obscurity is described by the biographer as "a wave which returns to the deep body of the sea" and which "sets running in the veins the free waters of generosity and magnanimity" (*Orlando*: 50) (which is, of course, reminiscent of Woolf's *The Waves*, demonstrating that the implications of this analysis are not confined solely to *Orlando*). Such a description evokes images of joy and plentitude. Conversely, this obscurity is also described as having a darker side which causes Orlando to be "haunted every day and night by phantoms of the foulest kind" (*Orlando*: 57). Nonetheless, Žižek suggests that identifying this obscurity with the colorful richness of life is a trap. He writes that "when we are confronted with an image of that deep horror which underlies our well-ordered surface, we should never forget that the images of this horrible vortex are ultimately a lure, a trap to make us forget where the true horror lies" (although it is not entirely described as 'horror' by the biographer, nor by Braidotti). Žižek subsequently claims that the nature of this 'true horror' which may appear as a "monstrous apparition with hundreds of hands, [a] vortex that threatens to swallow everything" is actually "a lure, a defence against the abyss", the abyss being the subject itself (Žižek 2008a: 66).⁶ Such horror, or 'pure life', can only appear as such once the subject has emerged as the inconsistency which retroactively makes what previously appears to be consistent *in opposition to* inconsistency. To avow this image as truth is to fall into the trap of affirming the existence of a self-identical substance existing 'beyond', an illusion which comforts the subject insofar as it defers the hard labour of confronting the absoluteness not only of its own division (or position as pure separation), but also of the split-ness of being itself.

Again, Braidotti reads Orlando's subsequent trajectory as one in which he (eventually *she*) participates in the plane of immanence. Orlando's life does indeed become animated by a disparate array of experiences and encounters: he travels to Constantinople, changes sex, frolics in nature with travelers, returns to England, meets her husband Shelmerdine, finishes writing *The Oak Tree*, and so it goes. Such experiences do indeed lead Orlando to eventually believe he/she possess "a great variety of selves" (*Orlando* 153). Braidotti views such experiential differentiation to demonstrate the richness of Orlando's life, to serve as evidence for his/her increased affectivity and capacity form positive assemblages with others, enabled by the dissolution of his unitary subjectivity. She neglects, however, to acknowledge the underside of these encounters. That is to say, the majority of Orlando's experiences, or 'selves', *end* not simply because of his apparent incapacity to cathect or insatiable greed for more, but because he is constitutively unable to fully realize and sustain them.

What appears at face value to be an enrichment of Orlando's lived reality, his increased capacity to "transform negativity into positivity" in conjunction with others as a result of the depersonalization he has undergone, is, again, deceptive, for it masks the fact that such a plurality of experiences is only possible because of Orlando's incessant failure. That is to say, only because Orlando negates each self and *striates* his life in this way, can he/she proceed to become-other, to re-concretize, as it were, once again. On each occasion that Orlando posits (or even merely experiences) 'him/herself' as a stable identity, the latter soon after dissolves, for in this very act of self-exegesis, Orlando only realizes him/herself to be other than him/herself, but in the same moment, realizes him/herself as this very point of failure, the failure of identification itself.⁸

Certainly, failure has a negative connotation in the commonsense interpretation. It is indeed negative in the ontological sense; however, we should be cautious not to lament it from a moral standpoint. Of course, failure, taken in its positive determination, is not compatible with a vision of ontological positivity or univocity, devoid of all binary distinctions, as is put forth by the vitalists; however, we can nonetheless read failure as the point at which the subject affirms itself, by returning to itself *qua* void from whatever substantial content it may have attempted to absorb. Failure need not be associated with solipsism, nihilism, or an apology for liberal individualism; rather, one might say that

it is only *because* of this failure that the subject finds itself inextricable from otherness. Comay captures this sentiment pointedly: “What binds us to one another is precisely our failure to recognize one another, a blockage underscored by the untimeliness of the encounter” (Comay 2011: 126). As I noted earlier, this failure speaks precisely to the subject’s universality, without which it would not be a self-conscious individual.

One with Nature or Towering Above?

Before concluding, I will bring forth one more example. Braidotti, among others, believes that Orlando realizes the generative, ethical power of dissolving his unitary identity and becoming deeply interconnected with *nature*. She holds that the Deleuzian ‘becoming-imperceptible’, or becoming-obscure in Orlando’s case, “means becoming one with a ‘Nature’ - a living environment - which never ceases to grow and flow” (Braidotti 2006: 202). In other words, it means to dissolve the hierarchy between oneself and one’s surroundings, such that one is no longer standing in front of the world, but rather inside of it. The primary example of this is Orlando’s time with the travelers in Constantinople, during which she comes to realize that “a love of Nature [is] inborn in her” (*Orlando*: 70) (although one shouldn’t glance over the fact that this ‘love of nature’ is referred to just prior as the ‘English *disease*’). Ryan has a similar perspective as Braidotti, suggesting that this encounter with nature informs Orlando’s desire to return to England with a new outlook, one which regards nature as “part of a shared agency rather than reduced to a passive background” (Ryan 2013: 123). One could argue that we see this hypothesis later confirmed when Orlando declares herself “nature’s bride” (*Orlando*: 122), after having tripped and fallen to the earth moments before meeting Shelmerdine. I once again suggest that such a reading eclipses much of the picture.

Such an experience of being intertwined with nature denotes an excess of life—that is, subjectivity itself—which stands over and above its natural surroundings. Only insofar as the subject is *denaturalized* does it have the necessary distance to be able to realize any sort of posited connection to nature, or objectivity in general insofar as it knows itself to *not* be already one with it. As I already claimed, the opening of the novel portrays Orlando in his given immediacy. It is here that (albeit only *for us*) Orlando is ‘one’ with his surroundings; however, it is precisely because he is not conscious of

himself as such (for he is here not yet *self*-conscious) that he cannot tap into the 'generative power' to be found in external relations. As Žižek makes clear, "it is only the subject's radical estrangement from immediate substantial wealth which opens up the space for the articulation of his or her subjective content. To posit the substantial content as 'my own,' I must first establish myself as pure, empty form of subjectivity devoid of all positive content" (Žižek 2013: 95). It is because Orlando passes through the process of estrangement, the realization of herself as more than simply biological life, that she can identify (albeit not in a wholesale manner) with 'nature' as her 'self' at all.

While Orlando experiences moments of deep enchantment with her natural surroundings, we must not forget that these moments are punctuated by Orlando's abrupt terminations of them. Recall that Orlando, despite her enchantment with nature in Constantinople, returns to England, as she finds it "impossible to remain forever where there was neither ink nor writing paper" (*Orlando*: 72). It is not simply that she cannot remain at one with her natural surroundings because of her passionate fidelity to 'culture', but rather, she cannot remain at one with anything. Orlando *qua* subject is precisely the 'out of jointness' separating nature and culture, estrangement as such, which renders their desired unity intelligible, but also for this very reason, unachievable. Insofar as she negates her connection to nature and returns to the West (where she will continue to negate each new self she assumes), she maintains her status as subject.⁹ Hence, Braidotti is right to see that Orlando, after succumbing to obscurity, can attempt to connect to nature; however, Braidotti, as well as the Deleuzian logic on which she relies, fails to see that this is only possible because of the subject's emergence, and hence the emergence of universality, which she insists on refuting. The conscious realization of any *particular* self or connection is only possible because of one's already-constituted universality, or pure separation from any particular identity.

Although what I have laid out here only deals with less than half the novel, what follows only continues to dramatize the logic of self-negation which Orlando has realized his/herself to be. The remainder of the plot, though beautifully written, presents no challenge to the consistency of my argument, but only continues to confirm it. We see Orlando's life as a *process* continue to unfold and only further solidify what we already

know her to be in truth. Orlando's eventual realization of herself as a "single self, a real self" at the novel's conclusion should not be read as a final achievement in which she once again congeals into a unitary person, but just yet another realization of her 'self' *qua* subject, who, as constitutively separate, is wholly herself in this very alienation. That is, she is an abstraction, not necessarily tethered to any particular content and she embraces herself as such.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, I have here put forth the claim that Woolf need not be beholden to the postmodernists and that a Žižekian reading is not only more desirable, but necessary insofar as it reveals Woolf's core of negativity. It is not that the fact of Orlando's 'many selves' that must be disproved *per se*, but rather we must be attentive to the fact that this is not the whole story. There is an integral underside which the words of Woolf herself eclipse, especially when we follow the lead of her postmodern interlocutors, but which is nonetheless conspicuously present. While Deleuze celebrates Woolf a product of 'haecceity', Woolf's novels, upon closer examination, in fact contradict this position and reveal another which exposes the open wounds of Deleuze and his posthumanist and new-materialist disciples. Woolf may seem to be a champion of multiplicity, affect, and becoming, but that is only because she is first and foremost a thinker of abstraction, negativity, and failure, without which we cannot have the former at all. As the significance of postmodernism wanes, we owe it to works such as *Orlando* to wrest them from the former's occupation and reveal their absolute contemporaneity.

Notes

¹ For an account of this, I refer the reader to Žižek's *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), *The Ticklish Subject* (2008b), and *Less Than Nothing* (2013), as well as Johnston's (2008) *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*.

² Although, Žižek conveniently neglects to acknowledge the remainder of Hegel's claim which states that the concept is nonetheless, "not exclusive individuality, but explicitly *universality* and *cognition*, and in its other has *its own* objectivity for its object" (Hegel 1989: 824). This however is not a dispute to be taken up in this paper, though I don't believe that this latter side of Hegel's

statement is in contradiction with Žižek's logic *per se*, even though Žižek has just claimed that the subject is indeed a point of exclusion.

³ Žižek has written at length in regard to this concept and regards Beckett as its literary exemplar. Might this imply an unusual congruence between Beckett and Woolf? For Žižek's extended commentary on this, see Žižek's *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Scholium 4.3.

⁴ Henceforth referred to in-text as *Orlando*.

⁵ In which Orlando exhibits behaviour exemplifying the nature of *Begierde* (translated as desire, but referring to unmediated desire, or a greedy impulse for consumption and removal of otherness only to return to oneself) in the first stage of self-consciousness in Hegel's (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§166ff.).

⁶ I am indebted to Johnston (2008: 105-106) for locating this connection in Žižek and framing the insight better than I could have.

⁷ I purposefully pay no heed here to the change of sex/gender Orlando undergoes, given that the moment he becomes obscure, he is already a genderless *cogito*, making the subsequent material-symbolic change rather superfluous, albeit entirely aligned with the logic of what it means to be self-relating negativity. The biographer's assertion that "[t]he change of sex, thought it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" only confirms this (*Orlando*, 67). As Žižek himself would put it, Orlando stands directly as the + in 'LGBTQ+', universality as such.

⁸ Victoria Smith notes that "the text echoes the difficulty of representation in the difficulty of representing woman for herself, as herself", and this is partially true (Smith 2006: 58). But one must go a step further and see that the text illustrates not just a *difficulty* to represent *woman*, but that it illustrates the *impossibility* to represent the *subject* itself, other than refractorily through its continuous self-negation. There is no innermost kernel of authentic being which might finally be represented if the right words are found; subject is nothing but the very failure of symbolization.

⁹ One might also make note, in passing, without diving into the argument, of the resemblances Orlando bears to Clarissa from Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The latter is often read as being in a state of tension between her contingent symbolic identity and internal desire to be 'one' with the world, to be her 'true self'; however, if we read her story through the lens I am suggesting we read *Orlando* through, we might also see her to be in this gap where she finds herself as subject, out of joint with both 'nature' and 'culture'.

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