The Sentence is a Lively Place: Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams's Experiments in the Short Form

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Abstract

In "The Sentence is a Lonely Place" (2009), Gary Lutz calls for more literature that recognizes the sentence to be "the one true theater of endeavor, as the place where writing comes to a point and attains its ultimacy" (5). As a response, this thesis considers the role of the sentence and readerly perception in the experimental short fiction of Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams. Woolf and Williams use their short stories to write the perceptual moment and they leverage the sentence and its effects toward this end. The short story is the ideal form for this perceptual thematics and poetics of the sentence given its ability to focus readerly attention on the sentence unit. Woolf and Williams exploit this by breaking the sentence in their stories, privileging fragmentation and ellipsis over linear narrative strategies and relying on their readers to do the perceptual work of reading between the gaps for story. This thesis argues that such an active, participatory reading practice allows for an innovative approach to character that resists conventions of psychological realism. Ultimately, I suggest that the result of Woolf and Williams's sentence-oriented aesthetic provides a way of writing character that is specific to the short form.

Résumé

Dans « The Sentence is a Lonely Place » (2009), Gary Lutz défend la création littéraire qui reconnait la phrase comme « l'unique et véritable théâtre de l'effort littéraire, là où l'écriture culmine et atteint sa pleine force. » Répondant au propos de Lutz, cette thèse s'interroge sur le rôle de la phrase et de la perception du lecteur dans les nouvelles expérimentales de Virginia Woolf et de Diane Williams. En se servant de la phrase comme espace poétique autant qu'unité sémantique, Woolf et Williams s'efforcent d'écrire la perception éphémère du moment. Étant donnée sa courte longueur, la nouvelle conduit le lecteur à s'intéresser au niveau sémantique de la phrase aussi bien qu'à celui de l'histoire. Aussi la nouvelle s'avère-t-elle la forme idéale pour explorer une thématique de la perception tout comme une poétique de la phrase. Ainsi, Woolf et Williams se servent de la concentration aiguë demandée par cette forme afin de détourner les normes de la lecture et de l'interprétation littéraires. En "cassant" l'unité sémantique de la phrase, les auteures privilégient la fragmentation et l'ellipse plutôt que la linéarité narrative. Le lecteur est donc forcé à tisser des liens de causalité là où il n'existe que de la rupture, à construire une histoire de "brèches" et de "non-dits". Cette thèse propose que la lecture active, voire collaborative demandée par ces nouvelles démontrent une approche innovatrice en matière de caractérisation littéraire, à savoir une approche qui refuse les normes du réalisme psychologique. En outre, nous maintenons qu'en créant une esthétique axée sur la phrase, Woolf et Williams prônent un mode de caractérisation spécifique à la forme de la nouvelle.

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Abbreviations

CE	The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf (I-V)
Diary	The Diary of Virginia Woolf (I-V)
Fine	Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine
Sexual	Some Sexual Success Stories: Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear
SF	The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf
Vicky	Vicky Swanky Is a Beauty

Introduction

Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are.
Gertrude Stein

Stein makes this stark claim about sentences in her 1934 lecture "Poetry and Grammar," in which she devotes a surprising amount of time to the discussion of prose writing. While she opens the talk by speaking of poetry, grammar quickly emerges as her primary interest and it does not take her long to get onto the topic of sentences. Her insistence that sentences are not emotional emphasizes the rhythmic balance of the paragraph. According to Stein, the emotional texture of a work is determined as much by the gaps between words as the words themselves, and paragraphs simply have a far greater potential for rhythmic variation. This is because, unlike sentences, a paragraph's internal structure is not bound by rules of syntax and punctuation. This freedom means that the emotional balance of a paragraph can be regulated in ways that sentences cannot. Yet, Stein is not a prescriptivist. She is interested in the possibility of achieving the emotional balance of a paragraph in a single sentence. She offers several examples that she believes exhibit both the unemotional balance of a sentence and the emotional balance of a paragraph:

> A dog which you have never had before has sighed.
>
> If a sound is made which grows louder and then stops how many times may it be repeated.
>
> Poplars indeed will be and may be indeed will be cut down and will be sawn up and indeed will be used as wood and may be used for wood. (Stein, *Writings* 133)

Beyond the fact that they are all single sentences, these examples share a degree of narrative autonomy. Despite their isolation they can generate emotion, to tell, or at least allude to a story. It is difficult to mention emotion and prose writing without falling into a discussion of narrative, though Stein does precisely this in her lecture. In fact, she openly admits that "narrative is a

problem to me. I worry about it a good deal these days and I will not write or lecture about it yet" (Stein, *Writings* 137). Despite this, Stein seems to be obliquely exploring the minimal units of narrative in the experimental sentences cited above.

Stein reveals the emotional potential of the sentence in the examples cited above. In doing so, she suggests the possibility of writing an entire work that uses the sentence as the primary site of compositional and emotional energy. This thesis looks at two writers who do this, Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams, and analyzes such a tactic in the context of their short stories. The short story is a deliberate rather than coincidental point of interest for this project, as its condensed reading experience places more emphasis on each sentence. The short story distributes readerly perception differently than the novel. Furthermore, the short story is known as a "form of the margins" (Hanson 2): not only does it struggle to escape its reputation as simply a novel-in-miniature, but it often takes as its subject marginal experience.[1] There are many short fiction writers who have tried to establish it as a genre of its own by experimenting with the resources of the shorter form. Woolf and Williams share this experimental ethics in their sentence-oriented stories that take the perceptual moment as a thematic and formal interest.

Let me briefly outline the link I see between the sentence and perception in prose writing before turning to the short story more specifically. Despite a lack of consensus regarding how to define a sentence, its syntactic autonomy is consistently emphasized in definitions.[2] I take sentences to be the primary objects of perception in a literary landscape because they function as the smallest meaningful units of narrative. One of the consequences of this is that we are unlikely to stop mid-way through a sentence to ponder its significance. If, upon arriving at the period, the

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[1] See Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* (1963).
[2] See Silliman, *The New Sentence* 63-71

meaning is still unclear, we read on in the hopes of further clarification. Only grammatical confusions demand an attention to the "inner life" of a sentence (Stein, *Writings* 131). This is what Ron Silliman meant when he claimed that the "*sentence is the horizon*, the border between these two fundamentally distinct types of integration" (87; his emphasis). Linguistic units, such as syllables, words, phrases, and punctuation, are subsumed by the sentence, while emotion and more complex meaning are constructed above and between sentences. As a result, a reader of prose fiction is unlikely to compare a syllable from one sentence with a syllable from another to understand the emotional meaning of a paragraph. This may seem obvious, but it is worth stating explicitly. Poetry, on the other hand, encourages such comparisons, emphasizing and interrogating the basic units of language. In rejecting the sentence for the line, poems direct their readers to the individual parts of language in ways that prose does not.

Thus, poetry and prose, in their respective use of the line and sentence, direct attention to and encourage perception of different elements of written language. The line invites a particular mode of attention that differs from that of the sentence. The sentence commands attention without obstructing it and generally minimizes the labour being done by the individual parts of language. It asks that the reader not loiter, encouraging them to move politely onto the next sentence. The emphasis is placed on the aggregate effect of sentences. Of course, one can point to many instances where this is not the case, where authors want their readers to loiter and where linguistic units draw attention to themselves within and across sentences in prose writing. However, this happens against a backdrop of the sentence as it is outlined above. It is a technique that works by contrast. Stein, in her experimental examples above, tried to deliberately craft sentences that demand an attention to linguistic units and semantic meaning simultaneously. She sought to join the unemotional balance of the sentence with the emotional balance of the

paragraph. In doing so, she asks how our relation to the linguistic units of a sentence change when we have no recourse to larger structures of meaning.

Take, for instance, her sentence "A dog which you have never had before has sighed." The simplest way to show what Stein is doing with this example is to model it as two sentences. The sentence is made up of two meaningful clauses that can be modelled in one of two ways:

1) A dog has sighed. You have never had this dog before.
2) You have never had a dog. This dog has sighed.

In parsing Stein's sentence, I have shown that both differ from the original, though the nature of this difference hard to identify. Both deconstructed options are emotional in a way that Stein attributes to paragraphs. In the first, the melancholy implied by the dog sighing is underscored by the wistful observation that you have never owned this dog. The affect is yearning and pensive, as though you have lost something that was never yours to begin with. In the second, the assertion that you have never had a dog is confounded by the claim that this non-existent dog has sighed. Any feelings of longing or melancholy about never having owned a dog are overshadowed by the nonsensical relationship between the two sentences. In both constructions, melancholy and longing exist alongside absurdity and confusion, though the accent is placed differently in each case. Herein lies the emotional capacity of the paragraph: its immense potential for variation is used by authors to control the dominant affective response of the reader. Emotion is processed linearly in prose, it accumulates from left to right, top to bottom. Readers are expected to read one sentence before moving onto the next, such that everyone takes the same path to arrive (ideally) at the same place. While there are exceptions to this that vary across texts and reading experiences, this model for text processing generally holds true.

The freedom to re-order sentences in a paragraph stands in sharp contrast to the grammatical strictures that prevent variability within sentences. Thus, in Stein's original phrase ("A dog which you have never had before has sighed."), what is changed by forcing two simple statements to coexist in a single sentence? Stein uses the resources of syntax to superimpose the two, embedding one clause in the other. Thus, the reader is forced to encounter them not only in a set temporal order, but in an established syntactic one as well. This matters because *the way we integrate meaning between syntactic elements is different than the way we integrate meaning between sentences.* In this case, the emotional significance of the sentence rests on the final verb 'sighed', which is deferred as the reader is temporarily arrested by the adjectival clause 'which you had never had before'. Unlike in the two-sentence constructions, where either melancholy or absurdity prevails, here both are inextricable from one another. There is no perceivable gap between these affects, they are syntactically entangled. The relationship is one of codependence rather than domination. The sentence's unemotionality resides in this syntactic rigidity, yet Stein manages to exploit the limitation placed on affective movement to emotional ends.

While Stein articulated this feature of the sentence, albeit elliptically, in her lecture "Poetry and Grammar," it was Ron Silliman who first formally theorized it in his 1987 essay "The New Sentence." Speaking about a trend he noticed in the prose poetry of the Bay Area, Silliman identifies what he calls the *new sentence*. A new sentence is "more or less ordinary itself but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has a tangential relevance," whereby its meaning is "heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences" (Perelman 313). In Silliman's essay, he begins by noting that there exists no consensus on the definition of a sentence, and he traces the various ways linguists and literary critics alike have

avoided the problem of undertaking such a task. He ultimately turns to Stein's lecture "Poetry and Grammar" to furnish an adequate account of the sentence, concluding that the "*sentence is the horizon*, the border between these two fundamentally distinct types of integration" (Silliman 87, his emphasis). It is with this in mind that he proposes the new sentence, which is ultimately "a sentence with an interior poetic structure in addition to interior ordinary grammatical structure" (Silliman 90). The primary consequence of this twofold structure is that the horizon of the sentence becomes porous. Readers are invited to move above and below this horizon at will, to read across and within sentences both poetically and grammatically.

The freedom of movement enabled by the new sentence makes it "decidedly a contextual object ... [such that its] effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet" (Silliman 92). As Perelman points out in his reading of Silliman, the main thrust of a new sentence is its paratactic relationship to its surrounding sentences. This disjunction means that while a work composed entirely of new sentences might appear fragmented and discontinuous, the gaps are an invitation to the reader to construct their own continuity. The reader becomes essential to the text's meaning given their interpolative role. Silliman gives his account of the new sentence to explain a shift that he observes in the prose poem, fostered by the language writers of his time.

I mention the new sentence as a means of addressing the potential for the sentence to make demands on the reader that can stand in for narrative continuity. According to Silliman, the new sentence "keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below" (91). This provides a way into the fiction of Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams, both of whom rely heavily on the resources of the sentence in their short

stories, albeit differently than the language poets. They, too, seek to redirect readerly attention with their sentences. Both authors direct readerly perception to the internal mechanics of the sentence for emotional, rather than simply grammatical, meaning. In doing so, they suggest a means for the short story to escape demands for narrative continuity. This formal technique is matched by a thematic interest in perception and sensation.

The short story is the ideal form for this perceptual thematics and poetics of the sentence given its ability to focus attention and exploit the fleeting nature of perception. These features of the short story have been emphasized since practitioners and critics alike began talking about the short form. In Edgar Allan Poe's now famous review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), he emphasizes the importance of a "unity of effect" that guides a short story, such that "[i]n the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design" (48). Poe claims that it is precisely the brevity of the short story that makes this unity possible. Therefore, he insists that short stories should be read in a single sitting, because "this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting" (46). Poe's unity of effect established the importance of attention and perception to the short form from its beginning.

With the rise of the modern short story in the early twentieth century came a thematic interest in perception. Writers like Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Woolf were among those who "departed from the traditional form" that marked the nineteenth century (Kostelanetz 217). The modernist preoccupation with interiority and psychological life is visible in the short stories of this time. The modern, 'literary' story is marked by a move away from omniscient narration and complex plot, and toward the cultivation of elision, compactness, and ambiguity. Short stories of the early twentieth century became increasingly fragmented and

less focused on recognizable events and action. Virginia Woolf's first published story, "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), is a hallmark of the modern short story with its use of first-person stream of consciousness narration and literary attention to a non-event.

Dean Baldwin reads this story as a call for "fiction [that] will one day focus on the subjective impressions people have of one another rather than on the so-called substantial world as presented by a writer of realistic fiction" (15).[3] Taken as a whole, Woolf's oeuvre seeks to do exactly this, though her short stories are where she explored this possibility most ardently. Despite this, there is still is a relative dearth of critical appraisal of Woolf's short fiction when compared to her novels. She is repeatedly absent in anthologies of the short story and is largely neglected in histories of the form.[4] Her stories are repeatedly used as a tool for analyzing her longer fiction, rather than as independent texts worthy of literary study.[5] Not only did Woolf's short stories garner very little acclaim during her lifetime, but "criticism of Woolf's stories (singly or as a whole) is sparse and we do not possess a 'critical vocabulary' to explain them" (Skrbic xiii). This can be attributed, in part, to their resistance to genre classifications compounded by the enormous variation across her shorter fiction.[6]

This thesis offers critical attention to Woolf's shorter fiction, with an emphasis on how she exploits the resources of the short form to maximize the emotional potential of the sentence.

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[3] He makes this claim in *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989), the first book length study of Woolf's short stories. Baldwin's study was largely made possible by Susan Dick's authoritative *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1985), later expanded in 1989, which was the first collection to bring together all of Woolf's short fiction. Its publication saw a rise in critical attention to Woolf's short stories, but, as Baldwin notes in his own 1989 introduction, "her reputation as a short story writer is still emerging" (xiii).

[4] See Reynier 2 and Skrbic xiii-xiv.

[5] Kathryn Benzel and Ruth Hoberman's edited collection of essays from various scholars working on Woolf's short fiction, titled *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), aimed to push against this trend. See also Nena Skrbic's *Wild Outbursts of Freedom: Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), especially her introduction, for further discussion.

[6] Skrbic notes that "most of [Woolf's] stories walk a tightrope between genres ... many are hybrid works that inhabit what Douglas Hesse refers to as a 'boundary zone' (86) between forms" (xv).

While her short stories share her novelistic focus on everyday non-events, the effects of this thematic interest are realized differently given the brevity of the form. Transient, fleeting perceptions can occupy an entire story, like in "The Mark on the Wall," without the need for larger structures of narrative to stitch together these scenes. The tolerance for plotlessness is far higher in shorter works and readers are far more open to experimentation given the knowledge that it will only span a few pages. Woolf's writing pushes this to its limits, subverting or eliding narrative conventions such that "it is easier to talk about the conventional elements of short fiction that are missing—that is setting, time, plot, event, and characters—than those that are active" (Skrbic xvi). Given these glaring omissions, there is not much left to Woolf other than words themselves. Yet, as she reminds us in "Craftsmanship," "a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence" (Woolf, *CE* VI: 95). The sentence becomes a resonance chambers for words and their "suggestive power" (Woolf, *CE* VI: 94), such that the associative velocity of words are simultaneously curtailed and expanded by the stricture of the sentence.

Likewise, Woolf uses the brevity of the short form as a resonance chamber for sentences and their emotional power. In her shorter fiction, every sentence has a particular visual, acoustic, and tactile topography that is meant to produce a felt effect in the reader. She encourages and fosters an attention to sentence-level detail while her narrators linger in perceptual experience. This union of technique and subject matter is central to the affective force of Woolf's short fiction. While her novels are similarly invested in sensation and perception, the durational experience of reading them does not complement such a thematic interest. The formal resources of the short story make it well suited to Woolf's exploration of momentary experience. Much has been said by literary theorists about the suitability for the short form to depict the ephemerality

of the moment.[7] One property, identified by Susan Lohafer, grounds this suitability in the primary distinguishing feature of the short story, that is, its shortness. Lohafer argues that, in short fiction, the ending is anticipated from the very first sentence due to the relative proximity of the beginning to the end. She identifies this phenomenon of "imminence" as what is "undeniably distinctive about short fiction" (Lohafer 249).

I mention Lohafer's account of imminence because it highlights the role perception plays in the experience of reading a short story. The brevity and density of short fiction cultivates an readerly awareness of the story's imminent closure. In other words, it heightens anticipation. Anticipation is present in all reading experiences, be it short fiction or novels. A reader anticipates what word will come next, when a sentence will end, or how a given story will resolve. In short fiction, anticipation is more acute given the nearness of the end to the beginning. There is the expectation that every sentence serves a purpose and that this purpose will be clear by the story's end. As Suzanne Ferguson writes, "the 'best' short stories give us a sense of the inevitability of each sentence and persuade us that they are as complete as possible, that any addition or deletion would destroy their aesthetic wholeness" (219). As a result, it would be unlikely for a reader to skip an entire paragraph in a short story, whereas they might in a long novel. This anticipatory willingness to attend to sentences means an increased engagement with the stylistic and thematic details of a work. Thus, short stories that thematize perceptual experience are complemented by the reader's own heightened perception. The ephemerality of the short form makes it well-equipped to capture the fleeting nature of the moment.

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[7] See Gordimer 265.

While Lohafer suggests that imminence results primarily from the length of a story, the material reading conditions of short fiction also contribute to its effects. Unlike novels, short stories are rarely, if ever, individually bound. Instead, they are collected with other works in magazines or anthologies, or published online. In all these cases, the environment in which we read short fiction often obscures the length of a piece. When we read a novel, we have a tactile knowledge of how many pages remain, however this knowledge is often unavailable to the reader of a short story. The piece could end at the top of the next page or it could go on for several more. While this may not hold true for every reading experience, it is the dominant condition under which we encounter short fiction. Such uncertainty complements the short story's imminence, cultivating an unstable reading experience. The uncertainty and instability fostered by imminence is a valuable resource for the short story writer who wishes to write about perception, as it produces a reader who is reflexively aware of their own perceptual engagement with a text.

Uncertainty, instability, and reflexivity are present in Woolf's short stories, but it is in the fiction of Diane Williams that they are given full reign. Williams's work is undeniably experimental and, like Woolf, she uses the sentence and its effects to her advantage. Like Woolf, her stories are missing practically all the traditional elements of narrative—including plot, setting, and 'realistic' characters. Not much happens in her stories, and they usually concern non-events, trivial everyday happenings that seem unworthy of fictional representation. She rarely, if ever, gives place- or time-specific details. Most of her stories could be happening just as easily in the mid-twentieth century as in the contemporary moment. She refuses to name specific places, giving over only generic types: nail salons, grocery stores, waiting rooms, and, most frequently, the homes of her characters. Williams' stories circle around recurring topics of marriage,

infidelity, sex, shopping, domesticity, grooming, food, animals, family, children, and death. While she takes mundane everyday encounters as her writing material, she twists them through the disorienting perspectives of her narrators.

The distinctive feature of Williams's writing is its intense brevity. Her stories rarely exceed 1000 words and some are less than fifty, being told in two or three exacting sentences.[8] With eight short-short story collections to her name, Williams is a well-established name in the American avant-garde literary scene, and an edition of her collected works is due to be released in fall 2018 by Soho Press. Despite this success, there is practically no critical appraisal of her work.[9] Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of scholarly treatment of Williams's writing is that it is profoundly experimental. In reviews, her stories have been variously described as "weird," "eccentric," "surreal," "precise," "exacting," as well as "discomfitingly and devastatingly funny." Her writing is dense and her syntax warped, making reading laborious and slow. I often

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[8] The short-short story, alternatively known as sudden, flash, or micro fiction, was showcased for the first time in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories* (1986), edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas. This anthology included work by authors such as Lydia Davis, Robert Coover, and Gordon Lish, all of which were less than 1500 words in length, as well as critical discussions about this emergent genre. Robert Kelly, one of the authors included in the anthology, defines sudden fiction as "neither poetic prose nor prosy verse, but the energy and clarity typical of prose coincident in the scope and rhythm of the poem" (*Sudden Fiction* 240). In his introduction, Shapard suggests that "the new popularity of the short-short story began in the spirit of experiment and wordplay in the 1960s," though he is hesitant to claim it as something altogether new, given that "its forms are as old as parable and fable, myth and exemplum" (*Sudden Fiction* xiv). He points out that, in many ways, "the modern short story was an adaptation of many older story techniques, including those of short-short forms" (*Sudden Fiction* xiv).

[9] The only significant study was published in 2003 by Laura Sims in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, which is an impressive analysis of all of her writing up to and including *Romance Erector* (2001). Sims provides a comprehensive account of Williams' thematic interests and stylistic features across her first five collections, with attention paid to the evolving role of the narrator. Williams, commenting on this article, acknowledged that "she commented brilliantly and extensively on this narration for which I am ever grateful. I think she knows more about it than I do … I remember during the composition feeling strongly that the omniscient point of view was the craziest point of view and nearly impossible to sustain—yet it remains one of my favorites" (HTML Giant). There have also been articles published in the French journals *Cahiers Charles V* and *Théorie, littérature, enseignement* between 2005-2006 by Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun and Arnaud Regnauld that look at individual features of Williams' writing, though these remain untranslated and, thus, unavailable to many Anglophone scholars.

find myself re-reading single sentences three or four times before moving onto the next, in part because her writing refuses to operate under the usual cause-and-effect logic of narrative.

At first glance, Williams might appear to be the complete antithesis of Woolf's reflective, discursive style. My decision to pair them in this project was motivated by what I saw as a shared formal and thematic interest in perception. While literary attention to perception and sensation is not new, I argue that there is something distinct in the way Woolf and Williams write the perceptual moment using the short form. Specifically, they linger on abnormal, fleeting, perceptual experience without subjecting that experience to analysis. Rather than present experience as unified and comprehensible, they preserve the incoherence and inconsistency of subjective perception. This privileging of ephemeral appearance over a sense of fixed reality means a move away from representation and toward resonance: Woolf and Williams aim to induce in the reader the affective texture of a moment rather than offer a linguistic reproduction of it. [As a result, semantics give way to surfaces. The texture of language and sentences replaces semantic meaning. What is being written about matters less than the rhythms, cadence, etc.]

Rei Terada recently identified this neglected realm of experience as the phenomenophilic, calling someone who cultivates these "*particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences*" a phenomenophile (3; her emphasis).[10] Terada even cites Woolf as "a spectacular and complicated example" of the phenomenophile (28). Before Terada, Walter Pater famously discusses these

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[10] Terada coins the term phenomenophile in *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (2009), where she investigates the privileging of reality over mere appearance since Kant, and the tendency to link them to satisfaction and dissatisfaction, respectively. She posits the phenomenophile as someone who seeks relief from the normative pressure to endorse the given world by "looking away at the colored shadow on the wall, or keeping the head turned at the angle at which the sunspot stays in view" (Terada 4-5). These experiences have traditionally been excluded from aesthetics given their fundamental unsharability, yet it is precisely this dimension that makes them appealing: "Because no one can be imagined to share them, no one can be imagined to appropriate, benefit from, or push one to endorse them. They offer a glimpse, not of spontaneous accord but of freedom from the demand for agreement" (Terada 6).

"unstable, flickering, inconsistent" impressions in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, where he notes that "[e]very one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation" (158). While these momentary experiences are fundamentally unsharable and irreproducible, one must still "grasp at any exquisite passion … or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours" in one's own life (159). Pater outlines his "aesthetics of ephemerality" (Gallagher 243) when he claims that, "[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (159). Woolf was most certainly influenced by the Paterian moment in her well-known description of the "ordinary mind on an ordinary day" which "receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (Woolf, *CE* IV: 160).

Both Woolf and Williams adopt a Paterian vein in their approach to the perceptual short story. Their stories seem to "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, [and] maintain this ecstasy" in their refusal to impose order and coherence on their depictions of the moment (Pater 159). They redirect readerly attention away from the world as it is and toward the world as it appears. Such a tactic complements their shared interest in the sentence and the surface features of language. This thesis took as its starting point the thematics of perception as it is articulated in Woolf and Williams, however its scope has since broadened considerably. It was only by reading both authors side by side that I came to appreciate the relationship between sentences and perception.

It is for this reason that I preserve my original pairing of Woolf and Williams in the analysis that follows, even though at times it may seem synthetic or contrived. When forced to share the same critical space, the differences between their writing styles becomes a source of productive friction. For instance, the sonic and syntactic manipulations of Williams tuned me to

the way Woolf is subtlety, though no less deftly, exploiting those same features of language. Likewise, my familiarity with Woolf's stream of consciousness writing cued me to how Williams has developed her own language to capture the fundamental subjectivity of conscious experience. It was ultimately the act of reading them together that allowed me to see both of their works anew. Consequently, this thesis does not argue for any special resonance between Woolf and Williams, nor does it to suggest that their sentence-oriented aesthetics is unique. What it does do is investigate how both authors use the sentence to control readerly perception across their short stories, while also acknowledging the variation within and across their respective approaches.

To make this argument, I begin my first chapter by examining the sentence and how it is linked to momentary experience in the short stories of Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams. Woolf's short stories are fundamentally present-oriented and privilege fragmented perception over linear narrative. I link this thematic interest to her technical manipulation of the sentence. Her stories are characterized by an "emphasis on the unspoken and unrecorded," and she leverages every sentence and the gaps between them to this end (Skrbic xix). Williams shares this attention to the essential role of the sentence in her stories, where sentences are the main attraction, often serving as entire paragraphs. The moment in Williams's fiction is defined by the cumulative effect of her sentences, which emphasize the fragmented and transient perceptions that constitute her narrators' experiences. The paratactic nature of perception is central to the moment as it is written by Woolf and Williams, and, in both cases, it places responsibility on the reader to construct meaning between the gaps. This technique can be seen in Woolf and Williams' refusal to present unified, coherent narratives, demanding that their readers take on the labour of interpretation.

Such readerly labour is the subject of my second chapter, which considers the reader's role in the story's meaning. Short stories demand vigilant readers and this is especially the case for experimental fiction. I illustrate the techniques that Woolf and Williams use to unsettle the reader and force them into an active relation with the text at the level of the sentence and story. I explore the consequences of this relation between reader and text, taking up American author Ben Marcus's argument that experimental writing teaches us how to read more skillfully. The short story as a tradition relies on "cutting away the kind of material we normally depend upon for narrative continuity and coherence" (Hunter 2). By eliding many of the features we expect to find in fiction, Woolf and Williams teach us to read between the gaps for story.

My third chapter considers the effects of this elision on plot and characterization, which are either aberrant or outright absent in Woolf and Williams' stories. In short fiction, the reader is asked to work with the text to flesh out the conflict and characters, since they cannot be developed gradually over time like in a novel. However, instead of falling back on traditional novelistic techniques, as many short story writers do, Woolf and Williams rely on their talents as literary stylists to suggest a new method for writing plot and character. They establish a 'unity of effect' at the level of the sentence, creating an affective mood for each story with highly controlled language and syntax. The disparate and at times bewildering sensory information that forms the bulk of their stories not only contributes to this unifying mood, but the mood, in turn, allows for the reader to make sense of these seemingly incoherent details. Thus, their stories rely on the formal experience of reading them to establish the conditions for their own comprehension. In doing so, they offer up new possibilities for the short story, showing how the form allows for literary possibilities unavailable to longer genres.

By looking at Woolf's often neglected shorter fiction alongside Williams' story collections, I argue that both authors challenge the reading practices brought to bear on their texts by rejecting conventions of narrative storytelling. The force of their fiction is grounded in their role as literary stylists as they rely on language and rhythm to produce affective responses in the reader. In prioritizing the stylistic emphasis of their stories, I argue that Woolf and Williams offer an alternative to the traditional short story that shows how the sentence can become the primary site of compositional and emotional energy in fiction.

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Chapter I: Perceiving the Moment

Miranda slept in the orchard, lying in a long chair beneath the apple-tree. Her book had fallen into the grass, and her finger still seemed to point at the sentence "Ce pays est vraiment un des coins du monde où le rire des filles éclate le mieux . . ." as if she had fallen asleep just there.
Virginia Woolf

It is like this that Woolf's short story "In the Orchard" opens, with Miranda asleep, her finger pointing *just there*. But already, language slips. "Just there" might refer to this exact sentence in Miranda's book, or perhaps to the corner of the world that it describes. Or, could Woolf, via Miranda, be pointing us to the internal mechanics of the sentence, the very place we are not supposed to linger. After all, the sentence is a crowded place. It is the site where author, narrator, and reader meet. The standard literary sentence is also crowded in the etymological sense: *crowd* comes from the Old English *crūdan*, meaning 'to press or hasten' and later 'to move by pushing' in Middle English. The sentence, too, moves us by pushing, providing the forward momentum that is essential to narrative storytelling. Gary Lutz identifies this hurried movement in his essay "The Sentence is a Lonely Place": "The sentence, with its narrow typographical confines, is a lonely place, the loneliest place for a writer, and the temptation for the writer to get out of one sentence as soon as possible and get going on the next sentence is entirely understandable" (5). However, Lutz is not interested in this approach to writing. What he wants are "narratives of steep verbal topography, narratives in which the sentence is a complete, portable solitude, a minute immediacy of consummated language—the sort of sentence that, even when liberated from its receiving context, impresses itself upon the eye and the ear as a totality, an omnitude, unto itself" (Lutz 5). He wants crowded, lively sentences that demand rather than redirect attention.

In his essay, Lutz cites Diane Williams, among others who were edited by Gordon Lish, as someone who recognizes the sentence as "the one true theater of endeavor, as the place where writing comes to a point and attains its ultimacy" (5). One of the primary features of this group of writers is their attention to the sonic and tactile qualities of language. Words have a solidity and materiality on the page that can be manipulated to emotional ends. Poets know this and their work is constantly exploring what Jenny Davidson, in her discussion of Lutz's own writing, calls "the mouthy pleasures" of language (31). Despite this, many fiction writers fail to exploit the sensuality of words, a failure that I am sure they justify as a sacrifice to the larger aims of narrative. Yet, what are the larger aims of narrative if not to elicit an emotional response from the reader? As Stein demonstrated, sentences can be as emotional as paragraphs in the right hands.

Lutz argues that it is by cultivating a sense of lexical inevitability that sentences can achieve emotional effects. This inevitability arises from the "intimacy between the words, a togetherness that has nothing to do with grammar or syntax but instead has to do with the very shapes and sounds, the forms and contours, of the gathered words" (Lutz 6). The letters, sounds, shapes, and textures of words carry affective information as much as their semantic content. These topographical details constitute the rhythm and feel of a sentence as much as its literal meaning. The sentence's capacity to impart emotion in non-semantic ways enables the possibility for the writer to establish a tension between what a sentence *means* and how it *feels* as an emotional percept. This is a particularly useful strategy in the short story given its concision. The brevity of the short story enables a felt "unity of effect," to recall Poe's formulation, that should saturate the entire piece. An attention to the inner lives of sentences and their emotional

potential offers a means of controlling this effect without compromising the economy of the form.

Lutz identifies Diane Williams explicitly with this poetics of the sentence in his essay, however I think he would be hesitant to include Virginia Woolf alongside her. In fact, I think many would be baffled, if not shocked, to hear them being compared to one another. While Williams's prose is terse, flinty, and uncanny, Woolf's is ornate, sinewy, and congenial. While Woolf is known for extending the life of each sentence using commas, dashes, and semi-colons, Williams often ends hers abruptly, producing short phrases. Woolf uses language to probe the inner lives of her characters, while Williams's "language directs us almost relentlessly to the surface—to objects, light, to words themselves" (Sims 24). These are the obvious, ready-made distinctions between their respective authorial styles. Yet, after spending a significant amount of time reading these two writers alongside one another, I am far more impressed by their similarities than their differences. Consider, for instance, how both authors abuse syntax to animate language and approximate the rhythm of speech. Or, how their diction regularly "press[es] one part of speech into service as another" (Lutz 11).

Because of these observations, and many more, I have come to see both Woolf and Williams as aligned in their impulse to break the sentence. My next chapter outlines the specifics of how they do this, but this shared impulse is motivated by their choice of subject matter. After all, it is at the level of the sentence that they must negotiate their thematic and technical investment in perception. As a result, they need to develop a technique that can accommodate this fragmentation. Breaking the sentence is their solution to the problem of representing the phenomenophilic in prose. However, before I can demonstrate how they break the sentence and the results of that fracture, I need to address their thematic interest in perception. Thus, let us

return to the opening line of "In the Orchard," where Miranda lies asleep under the apple tree and Woolf points her readers to the inner lives of her sentences.

This story brings into focus all the central concerns of this thesis: sentences, perception, and their relationship to one another. "In the Orchard" is made up of three short sections of text, all of which describe the same scene: a woman named Miranda lies asleep on a chair beneath an apple tree, an open book lying by her side; a series of noises—children reciting lessons in unison, a drunken man's cries, church bells—ring through the air; finally, Miranda jumps up and exclaims "Oh, I shall be late for tea!" Each of the three sections differ in the way they narrate these facts, though all take up the third person point of view. Woolf uses whole sentences to bridge spatial and perceptual distance within and across the sections, while also repeating, recombining, and rewriting specific words, phrases, and details to create three distinct stories about the same moment. The first begins by describing Miranda as though positioned over her shoulder, close enough to read the words of her book. The perspective then moves higher to describe the apples hanging from the tree "[f]our feet in the air over her head" (Woolf, *SF* 149). This upwards motion continues, reaching the top of the tree, then two hundred feet above the ground until, finally, the voice is so high above Miranda that she seems to take up only "a space as big as the eye of a needle" (150). As the first section ends and the reader is held high above the ground, only then is the identity of the focalizing perspective made clear. The wind, which can carry and dissipate sound with ease, appears to be guiding the narrative.

The second section is focalized through Miranda. It re-processes the first scene, making Miranda the mastering gaze and active agent. In this section, we are given a more recognizable voice, one that describes Miranda as thinking and feeling. The same events that punctuate the first section recur, albeit with different emphases. The cries of the children are mentioned

peripherally, placed in parentheses as an aside. Miranda, lying half asleep, half awake, hears the sounds around her through the filtering effect of her dream-like imagination. She hears the church bells as hooves galloping towards her, feeling as though "everything had begun moving, crying, riding, flying round her, across her, towards her in a pattern" (150). This frenetic movement produces a felt moment of unity for Miranda, where all the activity around her "seemed driven out, round, and across by the beat of her own heart" (150). Moments before she jumps up, afraid she is late for tea, the whole world lives through her perceiving body, pulsing with her heart's rhythm.

The final section of "In the Orchard" largely elides the human, focusing instead on the apple trees, sky, and birds. It opens once again on Miranda, noting how she "slept in the orchard, or was she asleep or was she not asleep?" (150). The guiding consciousness no longer has access to something as simple as whether Miranda is awake or asleep. This ambiguity is in direct contrast with the certainty evoked by the absence of qualifiers like 'as if' or 'it seemed,' which are used throughout the first two sections but not the last. There is no mention of the sounds that interject the earlier sections, instead everything is visually unified: "The uprush of the trees was tied down by these movements; the whole was compacted by the orchard walls" (151). Miranda's cry that she is going to be late for tea at the end is provided in parentheses, effectively bracketing the only recognizable event of the story.

With these three sections, "In the Orchard" provides three perspectives on one event, though we might also ask, as Amy Bromley does, "whether these should be read as three tellings of the same scene, or as three different scenes" (para. 15). Woolf demonstrates how a story told from a single perspective can never provide a complete picture. Together, all three sections produce an aggregate, multifarious point of view, which holds together a scene that can be

described from many angles. This composite quality draws attention to how all points of view frame their subject matter and the resulting responsibility of the reader to try to hold several perspectives together without collapsing them, even if that means being denied a defined sense of closure. Woolf also uses this piece to interrogate the process of writing itself, exploring the possibility for changes in point of view, syntax, and tone to create an entirely new story. Bromley notes how it "shows Woolf editing before the reader's eyes; testing ways of framing; bringing out certain aspects and diminishing others. Her typographical and grammatical use of brackets performs further parenthetical editing, by which she compresses certain points and re-frames others" (para. 19). Thus, "In the Orchard" shows the editorial process laid bare.

Woolf points to this reading of the story herself by making Miranda point to the line of French in her book. The sentence in question is taken from Pierre Loti's *Ramuntcho*, a popular romantic novel published in five parts in *Le Revue de Paris* between 1896 and 1897. The entire sentence, severed preemptively by Woolf, is "Ce pays est vraiment un des coins du monde où le rire des filles éclate le mieux, sonnant le cristal clair, sonnant la jeunesse et les gorges fraîches" (Loti 46). In cutting off mid-phrase, Woolf points us literally and visually to the internal mechanics of the sentence. She chooses to end the sentence at a particular place, directing attention to "éclate le mieux" as a description of the girls' laughter, which Loti goes on to qualify with further description in his original sentence. This emphasis on the French verb *éclate*, which means to explode or burst, is worth highlighting. Interestingly, the phrase *une vue en éclaté* is a synonym for the Renaissance word *écorché*, which refers to a diagram used in life drawing that shows the underlying muscle and bone structure of a figure. *Une vue en éclaté* refers more generally to any blown-up diagram of an object or system so that its various parts are made visible. "In the Orchard," in its deconstruction of a single scene, provides a diagrammed view of

story, showing its many components and their relations to one another. As with any *vue en éclaté*, it does its best to allude to the complexity of the whole by leaving gaps between the parts, gaps that invite speculation and imagination on the part of the reader.

The sentence unit has everything to do with how Woolf tells the three stories that make up "In the Orchard." Each section has a distinct syntactic and linguistic profile, with diction, cadence, sentence length, and punctuation used to create different effects in each one. The wavering tempo of the first balances short and long sentences, imitating the gusting wind that carries the sounds across the landscape. The words are mostly monosyllabic and each lands with a soft thud. Their sonic textures are exploited to show the tactility of sound by producing both euphony and cacophony. The second uses Woolf's signature stream of consciousness mode to represent Miranda's emotional landscape. Conjunctions, commas, and dashes extend the life of each sentence long past its anticipated end. Language gives way to metaphor and simile, while fanciful associations abound. Free-indirect discourse allows the third person perspective to convey Miranda's emotional life. The third is comparatively sparse, with mostly single-clause, adjective-less sentences. The diction is simultaneously painterly and scientific, while the complete lack of figurative language makes it concrete, unadorned, and precise. With this amount of variation across sections, it is surprising that anyone refers to this as a single story.

The radical disparity I have traced above is rooted in Woolf's manipulation of the sentence and its effects. She plays with how to linguistically construct a scene, repeatedly pointing to the sentence—explicitly with Miranda's finger and implicitly with her writing and editing practice—as the significant variable in this experiment. She also points to the sentence in her other short fiction, which so often takes the perceptual moment as its primary technical and thematic concern. Woolf's short stories have been described repeatedly by critics as concerned

with present, sensory experience.[11] Her thematic commitment to the transient, perceptual, and sensory is matched by a technical commitment to even the most minute elements of composition. Yet, Woolf's own comments about her short stories underemphasize this attention. While she took immense pleasure in writing short stories, she never saw them as serious literary endeavours. She describes them as sketches, little stories, or scenes in her diaries, emphasizing their provisional and underdeveloped qualities.[12] She used them as both a refuge from the labour of writing her novels and as a space to experiment with style that, in the case of the stories written before *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), led to longer works.[13] Much of her short fiction exhibits a heightened linguistic playfulness and generic freedom, as well as a complete renunciation of plot. The short form was amenable to Woolf's ability to "make up situations" but not "plots" (Woolf, *Diary* III: 160), as plot demands an orientation towards the future, while a situation allows one to linger in the present.

Lingering in the present is an indisputable interest for Woolf that she devotes much of her short fiction to exploring. The same is true of Diane Williams, whose fiction exists in a perpetual state of unfolding. Things are always happening in her stories, yet nothing is ever settled. Williams shares Woolf's view of the moment as "the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions" (Woolf, *CE* IV: 439). Like Woolf, many of Williams's stories present experience as fragmented and discontinuous by deconstructing the various elements that constitute a given moment. Take, for instance, the story "No, Cup" that was

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[11] For instance, Jean Guiguet claims that they "convey the unique quality of an instant when the world of our senses and the inner world, the present and the past, the here and the elsewhere, like the different elements in a solution, suddenly combine to form that solid body, reality" (342). For Nena Skrbic, they explore "the conceptualization of reality in terms of our simplest, most immediate perception of it" (169).

[12] See Daugherty p. 102.

[13] See Beth Rigel Daugherty's essay "'A corridor leading from Mrs. Dalloway go a new book': Transforming Stories, Bending Genres" in *Trespassing Boundaries* (2004).

published in Williams' 1992 collection *Some Sexual Success Stories: Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear*, which I have reproduced in its entirety below:

> Get the family out forever, out from around the table.
>
> Now, at breakfast, the most important objects on the table are the way-out-of-whack coffee cups for the parents, twice the normal size, and their double-sized saucers, all shiny black.
>
> The cups are almost as tall as the normal-sized white pitcher of milk that was there for the children, when the children were there.
>
> The white paper napkin, not nearly as important as the cups are, partially hidden under the biscuits in the basket, and getting soiled by biscuit grease, is sticking up. The points at the corners of the napkin are what stick up the highest, but the points do not reach as high as the white milk pitcher reaches with its lips—pardon, lip. Even so, allow for the possibility that both the lip of the pitcher and the napkin points express human aspiration, conceptually.
>
> Already there is too much to think about on the table. What is the most important thing? One of the cups should be enough to think about.
>
> Cup.
>
> The shine on the cup.
>
> Light.
>
> No, *cup*.
>
> The most important thing in any circumstance is what people want to believe is all wrong, you asshole.
>
> Defecation. (Williams, *Sexual* 82-83)

This story takes as its subject static perceptual stimuli rather than anything resembling a traditional narrative event. The text opens with the narrator banishing the characters from the scene, leaving a tableau of objects that becomes the central focus of the story. The narrator is parsing experience down to its barest bones, narrowing in on a moment and stripping it of its recognizable features. By removing whatever parts of the story that could pose a problem, the narrator hopes to simplify their job. After all, attending to some tableware is far easier than rendering the full emotional complexity of a character; a person can walk and talk, while an inanimate object is far easier to pin down. However, the inanimate begins to give way to the animate as the narrator anthropomorphizes the tableware. The lip of the white milk pitcher is accidentally described as lips, as though the narrator "can't help herself—first a mention of the

children slips in, then a greater slip … [b]y the end, the attempt completely breaks down" (Sims 32). In deconstructing a moment, the task of the narrator seems to become more rather than less difficult.

The narrator of "No, Cup," like so many of Williams' narrators, is shown to be in a state of crisis. The description given of the objects creates a sense of extreme proximity, as though the narrator is dwarfed by their very presence. The too-big cups and the tips of the white paper napkin are described from a close-up view, an uncommon perspective for omniscient narration. This myopic focalization culminates in the narrator becoming overwhelmed, confessing that '[a]lready there is too much to think about.' The narrator in "No, Cup" wants to focus on the objects at hand, yet is continually distracted by the associative quality of thought. Even restricting themselves to a single cup proves fruitless. The story ends with a final disruptive thought association ('Defecation') that follows from the frustrated insult ('you asshole') in the second to last line.

While this story is merely about a narrator's failure to do their job—a non-event by literary standards—the bareness of plot is enlivened by the grammatical and sonic qualities of Williams' sentences. The repetition of the opening line has an incantatory lilt, while at the same time it performs a certain clumsiness with the stumbling repetition of 'out' followed hastily by two more prepositions. The second sentence begins 'Now, at breakfast,' suggesting that what follows will be direct and to the point, yet it goes on to deliver a long, drawn out description that features arresting compound adjectives and multiple dangling modifiers. The third sentence ends on another simultaneously incantatory and clumsy construction with 'was there for the children, when the children were there.' The next sentences, which form the bulkiest paragraph of the story, are filled with ambiguously embedded clauses and descriptive digressions that noticeably

impede the act of reading. These lines demand slow and careful reading to parse, featuring many caesuras, like the em dash that serves as a corrective and the plosive sounds that stall speech. This is immediately followed by a shift: the tempo quickens, first with three single clause sentences (an assertion, a question, an assertion), followed by several short enjambed lines. The experience of reading these after the torpid movement of the previous paragraph makes us rush ahead, propelled by momentum towards the end.

Yet, before we can arrive safely at the final deflationary line, we must reckon with the most obtuse sentence of the entire story: 'The most important thing in any circumstance is what people want to believe is all wrong, you asshole.' It begins with the imperative tone of a truth claim, yet ends with an abusive remark, the subject of which is unclear. In between, the question of what is the most important thing is confused by the qualifier 'what people want to believe.' What people? What do they want to believe is all wrong? How can what they believe to be all wrong also be the most important thing? As these questions ring in the air, the final line is delivered like a blow: 'Defecation.' The reader is ultimately denied plot, answers, and closure. Yet, whatever this story lacks, it more than makes up for in its attention to the sentence and its powerful effects. There is no safety across sentences in a Diane Williams story, nor is there any guarantee that there will be a secure place to land at the end. In "No, Cup," the narrator is overwhelmed by the scene before them, bewildered by the sheer amount of sensory information. Likewise, the reader is inundated with sensory detail at the level of language. This parallel ensures that the ending leaves the reader in much the same emotional state as the narrator.

Reading the story again, as one frequently must do with Williams's stories, we might notice that the narrator points to the cups as the most important thing in the scene, presumably because they are 'way-out-of-whack.' While these oversized cups might not be worth noting in a

busy, action-filled scene, in the 'circumstance'[14] created by the narrator they stand out. The cups demand attention from the narrator, who cannot help but give it. In this same way, the narrator commands our attention. Not only is the narrator's version of events the authority, but the linguistic choices they make are motivated by a desire to hold our attention. Attention is what all narrators want and Williams plays this up in her fiction, so much so that Sims argues that the narrator "could be considered the main character of every Williams story" (30). In stark contrast to the subtlety with which Woolf's narrator—or, arguably, narrators—render the complexity of the orchard scene, Williams's narrator-in-crisis struggles to provide even one coherent reading of the scene at hand. The narrator in this story, as is always the case with Williams, is not a transparent window onto the scene. Her narrators distort the world by bringing it into hyperfocus.

While they differ in their approach, both Woolf and Williams remind us that this is the case with all the narrators in their stories. How the story is told *becomes* the story. Language, tone, focalization, and style have felt effects in their capacity to direct readerly attention. With their attention to attention, the narrators of "In the Orchard" and "No, Cup" highlight how perception shapes our engagement with the world. They linger on unusual sensory details and invite their readers to linger there as well. This phenomenophilic impulse means that they cannot help but rescue the ephemeral and the abnormal from the margins. Such an obsession with neglected phenomenal experience is at the core of Woolf and Williams' interest in the moment. Take, for instance, one of Woolf's most studied stories, "The Mark on the Wall,"[15] which is her most open endorsement of phenomenophilia. It is told from the first person perspective and

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[14] It is worth noting that *circumstance* has its roots in the Latin *circumstare*, meaning to encompass or encircle, suggesting a circle or field of vision.

[15] First appearing in *Two Stories* (1917) and then republished in *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), it was the first story written by Woolf to be printed by the Hogarth Press.

revolves around a speaker who notices a black mark on the wall. Rather than getting up from their chair to investigate, they spend the length of the narrative imagining what could have caused it. Using Woolf's characteristic stream of consciousness technique, the story follows the speaker's thoughts as they move from one possibility to another, until they end abruptly when another person enters the room and declares, "I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall" (Woolf, *SF* 89). Nothing happens in the story; the narrator does not even move from their chair. The entire narrative revolves around the relationship between visual perception and thought. Such a scenario is very clearly an exercise in phenomenophilia. Yet, in devoting an entire story to what should be a marginal and ephemeral experience, it gives it significance, becoming an extended example of how perception guides thought.

Perception dominates the story as both a structural technique and a thematic concern. The character of the mark shifts throughout the story, appearing at first as a hole, then a spot, and, finally, a protrusion. The frequent return to the mark cuts short each thought spiral, establishing a pattern of digression and return. While below the perceptual threshold of the narrator, the mark is, in fact, a snail with a spiral shell. Thus, the perceptual object comes to inform the structure of thought directly. The snail's ability to interrupt perception and generate novel thought spirals is celebrated from the very first sighting, when, to the narrator's relief, it "interrupted the … automatic fancy" prompted by looking at the burning coals (Woolf, *SF* 83). In this way, the mark disrupts the narrator's usual engagement with the environment, bringing them back to the present moment while also fostering creative associations. The speaker describes the sensation of being "torn asunder" by the associative pull of thought that emerges from particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences, to recall Terada (Woolf, *SF* 83). Thus, from the outset, "The Mark on the

Wall" seems to celebrate phenomenophilia's potential to break entrenched habits of perception and thought.

Yet, the story's interest in present experience is complicated by the fact that its events are displaced in time. The opening frames the entire episode as having taken place in the past, as it begins with the speaker wondering when they first saw the mark, thinking "[p]erhaps it was the middle of January" (Woolf, *SF* 83). The speaker reaches to the vivacity of visual memory to "fix a date," recalling sensory details that are precisely what Terada points to with her concept of phenomenophilia:

> So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals . . . (Woolf, *SF* 83)

The story shifts from past to present tense as the speaker is immersed in the experience of remembering, with no clear re-emergence from this memory. There are moments of apparent surfacing—"I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment" (84)—but these remain ambiguous in their temporal reference point. While the last line—"Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (89)—marks a return to the past tense, it is not exactly a full return to the frame of the story. This structural asymmetry highlights the vivid, immersive quality of phenomenophilia, even across time. It is as though the narrator, in the act of remembering, is swept away by the pull of the memory such that they forget narrative convention.

Woolf resists the literary tradition that demands a return to the frame narrative. She leaves the work unbalanced in this respect, relying on other means of creating a satisfying reading experience. For instance, her use of stream of consciousness writing allows for a symmetry between the diegetic time of the narrated events and time it takes to read the story. As

the reader is carried alongside the narrator, they succumb to the internal rhythm of the story that is established by the movement between the space of perception and the space of thought. The story begins with short thought associations that follow each observation of the mark. These expand to become spiraling diversions that go on for several paragraphs, only returning to the mark when they have gotten entirely out of hand. Woolf maintains careful control over this rhythm throughout the piece, using it to provide narrative momentum in a largely uneventful story. She uses syntax and punctuation to further regulate this rhythm. The urgency of the narrator's thoughts near the beginning are intense and fleeting, jumping quickly from one thought to another:

> Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. (Woolf, *SF* 84)

The end of the story stands in sharp contrast to this, as the narrator has taken to lingering on ideas, following them wherever they may lead without any impulse to return to the mark:

> I like to think of the tree itself:—first the close dry sensation of being wood; then the grinding of the storm; then the slow, delicious ooze of sap. I like to think of it, too, on winter's nights standing in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling, all night long. The song of birds must sound very loud and strange in June; and how cold the feet of insects must feel upon it, as they make laborious progresses up the creases of the bark, or sun themselves upon the thin green awning of the leaves, and look straight in front of them with diamond-cut red eyes.... (Woolf, *SF* 88-89)

In this way, Woolf uses the disruptive power of the mark to maintain complete control over the momentum of the story, such that "[i]deas assume almost the stature of characters, their interplay the conflict of plot. Language itself becomes vitalized; truth a matter of a simple phoneme—the difference between nail and snail" (Baldwin 15).

The lyrical qualities of this story also help to mitigate its anti-narrative sentiment. Woolf uses assonance, consonance, cadence, and other sonic manipulations throughout to produce euphony. The rich sound and diction of her sentences encourage the reader to linger in them. Likewise, their sheer length and the gaps between them transform each sentence into its own autonomous narrative. To traverse her sentences, which often make sudden leaps of logic, the reader must construct possible links between them. For instance, to make the leap between "[...] but these generalizations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough" (Woolf, *SF* 86), the reader must notice the implicit connection between *generalization*, *general*, and *military*. This detail is obscured by the fact that the dismissive clause "these generalizations are very worthless" is tacked onto a much longer sentence about "the novelists in the future" and "those the phantoms they will pursue" (86). These interpretive gaps proliferate both across and within Woolf's sentences. Likewise, ellipses are used throughout to signal a movement between the various sentences and paragraphs that serve as spaces of thought. This movement is "a binding factor because the ties between the writer and reader are strengthened through the work that the reader has to do to fill in the gaps" (Skrbic 39). Within sentences, clauses are not embedded like in "No, Cup," instead they are used to extend the life of an idea, like the organic outgrowths of a tree. The sentence and its effects are exploited to draw the reader more fully into the reverie of the speaker.

Yet, as much as "The Mark on the Wall" resists narrative conventions, there is an expectation that the story's closure will involve a revelation of the mark's cause. The past tense framing helps to establish this unspoken contract between reader and text. As a traditional literary device in short fiction, it promises a final interpretive intervention by the narrator, whose displacement in time allows for reflective reappraisal. Woolf sets up the frame only to not follow

through on what it promises, making the end even more disorienting. She very easily could have presented this story entirely in the present tense, making her choice to include the opening frame significant. By including this past tense framing, she achieves two important and related effects. Firstly, it demonstrates how certain experiences impress themselves upon us, such that they can be recalled with intensity and clarity.[16] This is important given the story's interest in the immersive quality of the perceptual moment. Secondly, by including the frame, she sets up certain expectations with the full knowledge that she will not meet them. In doing so, she challenges the belief that narrative resolution is necessary for a story to succeed. The end of the story reveals what the mark on the wall is, yet it does so in an anti-epiphanic manner.

In fact, the anti-narrative ending of "The Mark on the Wall" is almost identical to that of "No, Cup" in its structure. Both feature a final dense paragraph that slows down the reader using sonic and syntactic complexity. This is followed by several short lines that punctuate this density. The simplicity of these lines propels the reader forward, while the imminence of the end provides even more momentum. Next, this acceleration is arrested in both stories by an unusual second to last line:

> 'Though it's no good buying newspapers.... Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war!... All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall.' (Woolf, *SF* 89)

> The most important thing in any circumstance is what people want to believe is all wrong, you asshole. (Williams, *Sexual Success* 83)

Woolf's sentence wields the intrusive effect of dialogue to slow the reader, while also using ellipsis and parataxis as stumbling blocks. Similarly, Williams manipulates the syntax of her

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[16] Woolf famously described what she called "moments of being" in "A Sketch of the Past" (1976): "we are sealed vessels afloat upon what is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene—for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their 'reality'" (142).

sentence, making it dense and excursive, while the unexpected second person address is abrupt and vulgar. Finally, both deliver the final blow that is playful and cutting in its anti-epiphanic turn. These blows land like punchlines, simultaneously offering and denying closure. Woolf gives the reader the origin of the mark, while Williams offers a final humorous association, yet both gestures feel like tricks. There is a visceral feeling of dissatisfaction, that the story, and thus the imaginative play that forms the bulk of it, has been cut short. The reader cannot help but feel disappointed, even though they have been given no less than they were promised in each case.

This subversion of closure is central of Woolf and Williams's project, as it demands a re-appraisal of story as accumulation rather than culmination. By refusing to deliver a clearly intelligible or immediately meaningful resolution, their stories hold up the fragmentary and incoherent aspects of momentary experience over the unity and certainty that is associated with retrospection. As a result, readers who do not yield to the spirit of their stories are left unsatisfied, while those who do are invited to delight in the phenomenal. Woolf and Williams make the inner lives of their stories lively spaces, enacting their commitment to the phenomenophilic in every sentence. By foregrounding the emotional effects of language within and across sentences, perception is both thematized and formalized. Readers who attempt to navigate their stories without an attention to the subtle play of language are met with an unsatisfying reading experience, as evidenced in "No, Cup" and "The Mark on the Wall." These stories are unintelligible apart from their felt effects; any mere summary of their events inevitably fails to capture their artistry. In taking the perceptual moment as their subject matter and the emotional sentence as their technique, Woolf and Williams establish a reciprocal dynamic between theme and form.

In this way, the stories of Woolf and Williams are fundamentally irreducible. They resist summary, description, and, oftentimes, interpretation. The 'point' of their stories cannot be confined to a single sentence, nor can it be presented as a unified reading. The act of reading itself is where meaning is located. The reader's sensate body becomes a resonance chamber for the sentence and its effects, producing a "lived resonance between original experience and its linguistic reactivation" (Armstrong 154). To capture what a moment *feels* like, both authors exploit linguistic, stylistic, and narrative expectations, relying on the embodied act of reading to 'reactivate' the lived texture of experience. The reader's affective response to the language and rhythm of a given story serves to bring into focus its thematic substance. This sensory poetics of the sentence is deeply invested in the dynamics of perception and attention that are essential to the act of reading. As a result, meaning is always live in their stories. By eliding or troubling many of the traditional cues for literary interpretation, the reader is forced to rely on alternative means of understanding. Stories become moments of encounter, experiences not unlike the phenomenophilic perceptions they capture.

These moments are rescued from the margins of experience and given serious literary attention. While Woolf typically focuses on neglected everyday occurrences and unspoken emotional worlds, Williams has a more idiosyncratic aim. Williams's stories are often strange and unsettling, infusing the quotidian with a deep unfamiliarity. For instance, "Glee" chronicles a character's outing at a cafe and how colours arouse particular kinds of pleasure for them:

> We have a drink of coffee and a Danish and it has this, what we call—grandmother cough-up—a bright yellow filling. The project is to resurrect glee. This is the explicit reason I get on a bus and go to an area where I do this and have a black coffee.
>
> I emphasize, I confess, as well, that last night I came into a room, smiled a while, and my laughter was like a hand on my own shoulder. As I opened up the volume of the television set, I saw a television beauty and a man wants to marry her and she says, "I don't do that sort of thing."

> While in their company, the woman changes her clothing and puts down an article of clothing and folds it. How finely she shows us her efforts. Even as we have that behind us, the man speaks. His side-locks are worn next to his chin and his hair is marred by bright lights. The woman's head is set against a dark-purple shield of drapery. But when something momentous occurs, I am glad to say there is a sense of crisis.
>
> And for Vera and me—we are no exception. I've lived for years. In Chicago our sunsets are red creases and purple bulges and we can amuse ourselves with them. (Williams, *Vicky* 23-24)

This story's title connotes delight, exuberance, and joy. As our entrance into the piece, the word 'glee' primes us for what will come next. We are cued to notice any details that could explain the title, and the story immediately activates our gustatory imagination with the mention of coffee and a pastry. However, before delivering the visual cue of the 'bright yellow filling' that would concretize this description, we are forced to encounter the image of 'grandmother cough-up.' This careful sequencing deliberately produces disgust rather than delight. Yet, this is followed by the explicit claim that in going to the cafe the speaker's 'project is to resurrect glee.' If we read on, the speaker describes the experience of watching a television show, focusing on certain details, such as how the woman folds her clothes, how her 'head is set against a dark-purple shield of drapery,' and how the man's 'hair is marred by bright lights.' While it is not confirmed that these perceptions are a source of glee for the speaker, the final line about how they amuse themselves with the 'red creases and purple bulges' of Chicago sunsets supports this reading.

While the eponymous affect of the story might be the speaker's response to the vibrant colours of the foodstuffs, television show, and sunset, there is another possible reading of "Glee" that plays on the word's more derisive connotations. Glee, as opposed to delight or joy, has a certain incisive edge in that it can come at the expense of someone else, say, the reader. While the speaker appears to be a fully embodied character in this story, they also serve as its narrator. As addressed above, narrators wield considerable power in Williams' fiction. Thus, the project, which is supposed 'to resurrect glee,' could be the very act of narration. Such a reading draws

attention to the opening *we*, whose referent is unclear. It could be a nosism, that is, the practice of using *we* to express a personal opinion. Yet the ambiguous use of collective pronouns throughout the story troubles this understanding. There could also be a second person at the table, perhaps the woman named Vera who is mentioned at the end, though it is possible that Vera refers to the television beauty or someone else entirely. This slippage of pronouns ensures that it is possible for readers to interpolate themselves into the opening *we*. Williams holds open this interpretative possibility, slyly inviting us into what we anticipate will be a pleasant story before delivering the abject image of 'grandmother cough-up' through her narrator. The disgust evoked in this first sentence is unmistakably calculated, a pre-mediated trick that one of her narrators would gleefully laugh at.

"Glee" demonstrates Williams's keen awareness of the effects her syntactic choices have on readers. Her stories strive to produce certain affective responses by wielding language to particular ends. Before its appearance in *Vicky Swanky is a Beauty* (2012), "Glee" was published in the March 2009 issue of *Harper's*. In this earlier version, there are two noteworthy editorial differences. Firstly, the sentence "How finely she shows us her efforts" appears as "There's a continual flow of efforts" in *Harper's*. The sentence that appears in *Vicky Swanky is a Beauty* is both more precise and more ambiguous. It clarifies the efforts as being the woman's and inserts a collective pronoun that has no clear referent. The effects of this edit are apparent in the echo chamber created by the surrounding sentences. In the sentence that comes before—"While in their company, the woman changes her clothing and puts down an article of clothing and folds it"—the final verb "folds" is accented by its logical connection and sonic consonance with "finely." In the sentence that follows — "Even as we have that behind us, the man speaks" — two more collective pronouns draw attention to the question of who exactly is included in the

speaker's *we*. Given the extreme brevity of the story and its tightly controlled linguistic environment, even a subtle change like this can produce felt effects in its affective landscape.

Likewise, the second editorial intervention by Williams reveals her attention to how words signify beyond their defined meanings. The line "But when something momentous occurs, I am glad to say there is a sense of crisis," which appears in *Vicky Swanky is a Beauty*, appears as "But when something serious happens, I am glad to say there is a sense of crisis" in *Harper's*. Unlike the previous example, this change has less to do with its sentence-related effects. Instead, it capitalizes on the ambivalent meaning of momentous. While, definitionally, momentous means something important or consequential (i.e. 'something serious') the root 'moment' simultaneously gives rise to the sense of something that is momentary, fleeting, or transient. Given that words are repeatedly forced into new meanings in this story—such as when the speaker 'opened up the volume'—the ambivalently layered meaning of momentous is sustained rather than foreclosed. In opting for 'momentous' instead of 'serious,' Williams creates multiple avenues for interpretation. The effects of this change are compounded by the second half of the sentence, which remains the same. The speaker is 'glad to say there is a sense of crisis' in both cases. The shared consonance and connotation of 'glad' and 'glee' links the larger project of the story to this comment. The speaker feels glee at the crisis of ambivalence that saturates the entire story, with which the reader must ultimately reckon.

Here, the narrator-in-crisis I spoke about in "No, Cup" takes on new meaning. If a crisis is a point of possible divergence or a situation that demands a decision be made, then the narrator of any given story is in a perpetual state of crisis. They are repeatedly faced with the decision of how to tell a given story. In fiction, these decisions are made by authors, but Williams dramatizes the narrator in such a way that she locates the editorial authority of a story within the

diegesis. Williams' narrators foreground rather than conceal the sense of crisis that lies at the center of all storytelling. This foregrounding transforms the narrator's crisis into the central narrative conflict. Since there are usually no satisfying resolutions to these conflicts, the burden is placed on the reader to grapple with the interpretative possibilities that they reveal. Readers are invited to actively engage with a story in the hopes of resolving its ambiguity and, at times, this proves worthwhile. Some of Williams's texts unfold themselves upon close re-reading, rewarding the attentive reader who chooses to linger in them. Yet, at other times, they refuse to yield, remaining hard and impenetrable. This variation across stories ensures a simultaneously captive and captivated reader.

Virginia Woolf's short stories also produce a reader held captive by the moment, though she achieves this through different means. Her narrators are not dramatized as hysterically as Williams's. Yet, both share a fondness for narrative indeterminacy and a belief that the perceptual moment is "a series of conjunctions and possibilities rather than a singular, well-defined unit or complete situation" (Skrbic 12). Their fictional depiction of phenomenophilic experience achieves this multi-referentiality by cultivating it at even the most basic levels of language. I begin my next chapter by addressing how phenomenophilic short fiction is at odds with the logic of the sentence. While there are many ways to resolve this tension, Woolf and Williams choose to address this by breaking the sentence. I engage in two extended close readings to show how Woolf and Williams break the sentence and generate ambiguity that impacts on reading. I suggest that it is by exploiting and sabotaging readerly attention and perception that their stories can develop and demand new modes of reading. Both authors exploit the sentence to maximum effect, such that their fiction's thematics become inextricable from its tactics. Readerly attention is controlled and corralled in a way that self-reflexively points to the

perceptual labour demanded by their stories. This attention to attention both complements and is complemented by the fact that the perceptual moment is the central preoccupation of their fiction. Form points to theme points to form in an endless loop.

Chapter II: Breaking the Sentence

What from one perspective may look like a sign of radical disconnection may from another be a gesture of continuity.
Bob Perelman

Fiction that takes the phenomenophilic as its subject matter is faced with the difficult task of representing such fragmentary impressions in narrative form. Rather than attempt mimesis, Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams construct stories that themselves induce the intensity and bewilderment of present experience. Their fiction bombards their readers with sensory detail without offering any unifying perspective or clear resolution. To sustain this disorienting effect, they withhold much of the continuity that is typical of prose writing. Yet, they are still bound by the limits of the sentence. The sentence, as the tractional, load-bearing unit of narrative, has causal power and in many cases, "sentences are themselves brief narratives" (Perelman 316). Because prose encompasses, by many definitions, everything that is not verse, the sentence of literary prose is influenced by everyday language use. As a result, the sentence carries certain expectations for clarity, coherence, and rationality. To bend the sentence to their purposes, Woolf and Williams must break from these entrenched associations.

To break the sentence is to resist the narrative impulse to connect along syntactic and semantic lines and, instead, to generate new sites of continuity. The new sentence of the language poets is one example of how this can be done. These authors, working in the 1970s, wrote prose poems consisting entirely of what Ron Silliman has called 'new sentences.' Aa I mentioned before, a new sentence "is more or less ordinary itself but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has a tangential relevance" (Perelman 313). Unlike in conventional prose, where the relationship between one sentence and the next is usually evident, new sentences do not follow logically, in the causal or narrative sense, from one another. The

new sentence deconstructs the impulse to read in strictly narrative terms by using radical parataxis. By removing the connective tissue between sentences, the responsibility to construct meaning is disproportionately shifted onto the reader. There is no longer any authorial meaning to be interpreted, the reader must supply their own. The act of reading serves as the unifying impetus in these works. Meaning is no longer located in language's representational power but, rather, in the associative pull of words and images that differs for each reader, which can never be fully anticipated by the author. Thus, the primary mode of narrative integration is withheld, but another is offered in its place.

While the new sentence is a useful model for understanding how Woolf and Williams might break the sentence, it resists being easily mapped onto their work. Unlike the work of the language poets, which brings the sentence to bear on poetry, the stories I am working with in this thesis bring poetic techniques to bear on the short story. This distinction is significant because the expectations are different in each case. The short story is a narrative genre that relies on the traditional elements of fiction, including character, setting, and plot. Thus, it carries with it different expectations than the prose poem, which usually lacks these features. Since larger structures of narrative, such as character, rely on the sentence functioning as a tractional, load-bearing unit, any break from this norm will have felt effects. Woolf and Williams break the sentence with full knowledge of this ripple effect, using it to destabilize long-held conventions of narrative storytelling, as "one cannot abolish story unless one abolishes the sequence between sentences" (May xix). By unsettling conventions of writing and reading at the level of the sentence, they are ultimately able to generate new ways of writing character. This will be the central concern of my third chapter.

However, first, I want to consider how the difficulty generated by breaking the sentence is a productive tool for both the writer and reader. Ben Marcus, in his wryly titled "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction" (2005), makes a case for difficult literature against its many detractors, including Jonathan Franzen and others who uphold realism as the ideal narrative mode. From the realist point of view, books are not meant to be challenging and "effort is the last thing we are supposed to request of a reader" (Marcus 39). Yet, as a champion of experimental writing, Marcus profoundly disagrees:

> If reading is a skill, with levels of ability, and not simply something we can or cannot do, then it's a skill that can be improved by more, and more varied, reading. The more various the styles we ingest, the better equipped we are to engage and be moved by those writers who are looking deeply into the possibility of syntax as a way to structure sense and feeling, packing experience into language, leveraging grammar as a medium for making art. (40)

Marcus goes on to name many experimental writers whose fiction does exactly this, including Virginia Woolf and several contemporary authors who were, like Diane Williams, students of Gordon Lish. For him, all these writers share a desire to innovate and invigorate their use of language so as "to discover meaning where we might not think to find it, as if it's burning entirely new synaptical pathways" (Marcus 49). It is this generative feature of so-called "difficult" fiction that he holds up as worthy of pursuit. In the writer's attempt to unsettle conventions of language and meaning, the reader's entrenched habits of reading are also called into question. Such writing "creates in us desires we did not know we had, and then enlarges those desires without seeming desperate to please us" (Marcus 48).

This lack of desperation is central to both Woolf and Williams's motive for breaking the sentence. Their willingness to deny the reader a sense of narrative closure, as shown in the previous chapter, is a key example of this. Of course, in not writing to please, there is a necessary

risk that the reader will become frustrated or bored by a story and simply stop reading. This is the worry that Franzen articulates when he says that "difficulty is a sign of trouble … it may convict an author of placing his selfish artistic imperatives or his personal vanity ahead of the audience's legitimate desire to be entertained—of being, in other words, an asshole" (qtd. in Marcus 46). While Franzen seems to think that there are only to options—writing for the reader's entertainment and writing for one's own ego—this is not the case. We need only consider the fiction of Woolf and Williams to see how difficulty can be a source of productive friction. Their experiments in prose are not intended to dissuade their readers, but to invite them to temporarily enter a different relationship with language.

Inevitably, these sojourns in new linguistic landscapes are not passive affairs; they require some effort on the part of the reader. Franzen would have us think that this is an outrageous demand, that it might cause readers to abandon literature as an art form. Marcus, on the other hand, offers a more charitable view, arguing that many people, if not most, read books to be challenged and pushed as readers. He insists that reading is a collaborative act and a shared effort. Any reader willing to give a book their valuable time, attention, and patience is not going to stop reading at the slightest sign of difficulty. While Marcus advances a strong claim in his essay about experimental fiction's ability to teach us to read better, I am hesitant to take his thesis at its full strength. However, I think a modest claim can be made about what "difficult" writing, like Woolf and Williams's short stories, affords us. I think literature that experiments with linguistic and narrative convention demands that we renegotiate our relationship to language and story in the context of their work. Whether these renegotiations have effects that

ripple outside the limits of a text is beyond the scope of this project.[17]

As I said before, I locate the sentence as the site of Woolf and Williams's experimental aesthetics. To address the felt effects of how they break the sentence, respectively, I will provide an extended close reading of a representative story by each author. Woolf's "Monday or Tuesday" provides an ideal starting point given that the entire story is a collection of discontinuous, fleeting sense-perceptions. It shares its name with a line from Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction" (1921), where she offers the following vision for contemporary literature:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, *as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday*, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. (Woolf, *CE* IV: 160; my italics)

Woolf tries to achieve this effect in "Monday or Tuesday," which presents a series of fragmented impressions unified by a radically mobile, third person perspective, a voice that shares many similarities with the disembodied narrator of "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse* as well as of the interludes in *The Waves* (1931). In all three cases, Woolf adopts this point of view as a means of addressing the marginal experiences that constitute 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.' Such a focus on phenomenophilic experience demands a renunciation of larger structures of meaning such as 'plot,' 'comedy,' 'tragedy,' etc. As a result, the sentence, which has been so long associated with these traditional narrative structures, must be overhauled. "Monday or Tuesday" displays a substantial array of Woolf's techniques for breaking the sentence, most

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[17] See Hutto.

notably in its use of ellipsis and parataxis. By deliberately embedding gaps and fractures in her story, she invites the reader to engage in an active, collaborative mode of reading.

The most effective way to show how Woolf breaks the sentence of its narrative constraints in "Monday or Tuesday" is to analyze it one paragraph at a time. The story begins:

> Lazy and indifferent, shaking space easily from his wings, knowing his way, the heron passes over the church beneath the sky. White and distant, absorbed in itself, endlessly the sky covers and uncovers, moves and remains. A lake? Blot the shores of it out! A mountain? Oh, perfect—the sun gold on its slopes. Down that falls. Ferns then, or white feathers, for ever and ever— (Woolf, *SF* 137)

The opening sentence defers its subject with three adjectival clauses, stretching syntax to its limits to delay the introduction of the heron. This pattern of deferral is seen again in the next sentence, where the sky is described before it is named. Delaying the mention of the sentence's subject means that the descriptive clauses hang ambiguously without any clear anchor point. This sentence construction, which is a staple of Woolf's style, forces the reader to lean into each sentence, to imagine what subject could be connected to these fragments of description and action. She manipulates syntax to ensure that perception comes before comprehension. These two sentences also introduce a tactic of negation with the prepositional pairs of *over-beneath, covers-uncovers,* and *moves-remains*. Thus, the heron and sky, the only active agents at this point in the story, are both bracketed by deferral and negation. They are surrounded by instability, a fact underscored by the splintered lines that follow. At the word lake, the reader obediently conjures the requisite mental image, only for the narrator to revise their description. Next, a mountain is mentioned, only to be changed as well. The narrator is akin to the painter, using the reader's own perceptual capacity as a medium. Yet, already, the cracks begin to show as what should be seamless description is consistently shown to be under revision.

The opening paragraph deconstructs the process of mental imagery that is so essential to reading fiction, conjuring an image only to alter it. This strategy of syntactic subversion and active revision breaks with narrative convention by drawing attention to the perceptual labour involved in reading. This forces the reader to slow down to accommodate the narrator's sudden swerves. The second paragraph escalates this syntactic disruption:

> Desiring truth, awaiting it, laboriously distilling a few words, for ever desiring—(a cry starts to the left, another to the right. Wheels strike divergently. Omnibuses conglomerate in conflict)—for ever desiring—(the clock asseverates with twelve distinct strokes that it is midday; light sheds gold scales; children swarm)—for ever desiring truth. Red is the dome; coins hang on the trees; smoke trails from the chimneys; bark, shout, cry "Iron for sale"—and truth? (Woolf, *SF* 137)

A single sentence encompasses almost the entire paragraph, broken by em dashes and parentheses, where "the dashes act as a counter-language, stalling the progression to a terminal point … [and] suggest[ing] the action of holding one's breath" (Skrbic 58). This sentence, which is about the desire for truth, is repeatedly stalled and interrupted by fleeting perceptual fragments of human activity. These impressions, which blossom inside parenthesis hugged by dashes, have a relative sense of syntactic coherence relative to the fractured embedding sentence. The meaningless repetition of 'desiring truth' makes the concrete parenthetical perceptions seem intelligible by contrast. By quite literally breaking a sentence that pontificates loftily about truth, Woolf asserts the importance of immediate, sensate particulars over any sweeping, oversimplified universal. It is also important to note that these impressions are located in space and time. The sounds have a spatial dimension that point to the embodiment of the speaking voice. The second and final sentence of this paragraph underscores the speaker's subject-position, detailing several phenomenophilic particulars separated by semicolons. Rather than the isolating dashes of the preceding sentence, the semicolons both separate and connect these impressions, established a sense of space as well as place in their detail. These fragments of

sensory experience are bound together in a unified scene by punctuation, much like how the human eye forms a composite image from individual saccadic movements.

Yet, the constructive property of the semicolon is abandoned in the next paragraph, which returns to the dash and its distancing effect:

> Radiating to a point men's feet and women's feet, black or gold-encrusted—(This foggy weather—Sugar? No, thank you—The commonwealth of the future)—the firelight darting and making the room red, save for the black figures and their bright eyes, while outside a van discharges, Miss Thingummy drinks tea at her desk, and plate-glass preserves fur coats— (Woolf, *SF* 137)

A single, grammatically incomplete sentence makes up this entire paragraph, spliced together by dashes and commas. Even though the entire sentence is about human activity, it never names a single active agent. Men's and women's feet are mentioned, as are vague figures and the generic moniker 'Miss Thingummy.' Similarly, the van, fire, and fur coat imply human presence without mentioning a corresponding subject. Bits of human speech are bracketed, with no corresponding speakers identified. The human is effectively elided, present only through absence. Likewise, the subject of the sentence is syntactically deferred by the opening gerund. This deferral, coupled with the warped syntax, means that it is never clear what is 'radiating to a point.' Perhaps it is the 'firelight' described here, or else the 'truth' that is mentioned earlier. While what precisely radiates remains ambiguous, this same ambiguity directs readerly attention to the figurative association between these two most obvious possibilities, truth and light. Such an association provides a possible answer to the question that echoes throughout the story: perhaps truth is ultimately subject to one's sphere of vision. Certainly, any truth that is expressed in "Monday or Tuesday" depends on the narrator's lamp-like point of view.

Yet the story does not end on this possibility, as indicated by the dash that ends the paragraph. Instead, it continues, culminating in a series of verbs that are denied any object, other than the question of truth tacked onto the end:

> Flaunted, leaf-light, drifting at corners, blown across the wheels, silver-splashed, home or not home, gathered, scattered, squandered in separate scales, swept up, down, torn, sunk, assembled—and truth? (Woolf, *SF* 137)

These verbs ask us to imagine movement without telling us what is moving. The specificity of these movements problematizes the previous moment of understanding: if truth is vision, how do we *see* these words abstracted from any subject? Not only that, but the sentence quickly falls into contradiction and negation. The reader is left to flounder in ambiguity, left only with the same question as before, until, finally, a proper tractional sentence appears on the horizon:

> Now to recollect by the fireside on the white square of marble. From ivory depths words rising shed their blackness, blossom and penetrate. Fallen the book; in the flame, in the smoke, in the momentary sparks—or now voyaging, the marble square pendant, minarets beneath and the Indian seas, while space rushes blue and stars glint—truth? or now, content with closeness?
>
> Lazy and indifferent the heron returns; the sky veils her stars; then bares them. (Woolf, *SF* 137)

Finally, the reader is given something solid to hold onto, a scene of a book being read by the fireside, though any sign of a human reader is elided. The reader's own body is invited to fill this gap, to notice how the book in their own hands is its own 'white square of marble.' From the 'ivory depths' of both the fictional and actual books, words achieve a liveliness that is both animate and emphatic, responsive and assertive. Words move beyond the confines of the page to resonate with the reader's body. This act of reading *with* a text might not lead to any single truth, something the narrator seems to long for. However, Woolf prioritizes another kind of knowledge in "Monday or Tuesday," that which arises from being 'content with closeness.'

The story ends with a return to the heron and sky from the beginning, creating a circularity that suggests an endless moment, akin to the perpetual rhythms of the quotidian, of Monday turning into Tuesday. Like in "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf uses non-human forces to provide the central momentum in this story. Both stories, which come from the 1921 short story collection *Monday or Tuesday*, use similar techniques to different ends. The entire collection is interested in "underscoring the elision between feelings, thought, and their expression in words" (Skrbic xx). The stories in it work off the fact that "the short story is suited to explore the dialectic between what is evasive and that which is materially present" without being required to reconcile the two (Skrbic 13). While the human narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" offers some point of contact, the subjectivity of "Monday and Tuesday" is unfamiliar. Not only does Woolf ask her reader to inhabit a more collective, distributed consciousness, but she also refuses to hold out language as a familiar point of contact.

Ultimately, the story theorizes its own reading practice, which "proves to be a general characteristic of the language of modernism—it is constantly teaching us, as we read it, how to read it and how it is systematically organized" (Malamud 37-8). In this case, the embodied, constructive mode of reading that Woolf not only theorizes, but demands, is a direct result of Woolf's willingness to break the sentence. Alongside the tactics of ambiguity, ellipsis, and disjunction outlined above, she also repeats words—such as 'gold,' 'red,' and 'scales'—causing the reader to pause in recognition or stumble over their familiarity. This repetition teasingly suggests a latent pattern, only to refuse any unifying reading upon closer look. As much as these elements disrupt the reading process, they are also what enable the reader to "become inextricably linked to the narrator's perceptions and apprehensions and combine their efforts with the narrator's story telling, piecing the story together by whatever means, through bits and

fragments" (Benzel 158). The fragmented nature of the story, with all its fits and starts, "count on the reader doing most of the work" (Skrbic 27). The focus on present experience paired with the breaking of the sentence is what allows for this.

This ability to cultivate a new model for reading that challenges expectations for resolution and meaning is the power that comes with breaking the sentence. By refusing to write along grammatically or logically coherent lines, those who break the sentence foster new modes of understanding that prioritize ambiguity, emotion, and collaboration. The individual breaks in "Monday or Tuesday," such as the intrusive dashes and parentheses, are *meant* to elicit a response of frustration or confusion. Woolf does not want a passive reader and her sentences make every effort to provoke and fascinate. It is this same desire that drives Diane Williams's writing. Her work is deeply invested in making language as provocative as possible. Yet, this is not to elide their differences, which are many. As I mentioned earlier, many of these distinctions stem from their literary context rather than their motives for breaking the sentence. However, let us turn to Williams's story "To Revive a Person is No Slight Thing" from her most recent collection *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* (2016). Since her first collection, the stories of Williams have become increasingly elliptical and subtle in their effects, which is why I have chosen a recent work. While this story is marginally longer than average, it is characteristic of the way Williams breaks the sentence across her fiction.

One immediate difference between Woolf and Williams is that they leverage the paragraph to different purposes. While certain sentences in "Monday or Tuesday" extend across the barrier of the paragraph, Woolf does not deviate radically from the conventions of paragraphing. Her paragraphs usually signal a shift, either in perspective or subject, even if certain words, phrases, and ideas breach these barriers. Her paragraphs do not delineate a logical

series of events, but they do assemble collections of sentences for an affective purpose. While Williams also manipulates the paragraph for emotional effect, she does this by deconstructing it. Many of her paragraphs are a single sentence long and recall the enjambment of the poetic line. This abrupt effect disorients the reader. Given the already parataxic relationship between Williams's sentences, subverting the instructive power of the paragraph only heightens the absurdity of her prose. It is by making her sentences entire paragraphs that Williams achieves the sudden intensity and staccato rhythm of her fiction. Given Williams's unusual paragraphs, I have chunked the following text along my own intuitive lines. "To Revive a Person is No Slight Thing"[18] begins—like every Diane Williams story—with a bang:

> People often wait a long time and then, like me, suddenly, they're back in the news with a changed appearance. (Williams, *Fine* 25)

This opening sentence, which functions as the reader's first point of contact after the title, is bewildering rather than anchoring. The reader is given no clear context for this vague and obscure statement. The title primes us to understand the implied return as a kind of revival, yet this connection only further obscures any interpretation. The dominant effect of this sentence is surprise and this is something that all her sentences strive towards. Her diction and syntax defy collocation. Yet, despite Williams's break with expected language use, there is a certain harmony in the way the sentence is sonically arranged. Notice the repeated /t/ sound in the front half of the sentence, the way the commas imitate natural pauses in speech, and the sing-song rhythm of the end rhyme of *me* with *suddenly*. These details carry the reader quickly and efficiently into the second half of the sentence, which ends on an ambiguous note. Why is the narrator 'back in the

---

[18] Williams takes this phrase from a sermon by Nachman of Bratslav, a Hasidic Rabbi. His religious philosophy advocated speaking to God in normal conversation (Seidler 41).

news with a changed appearance'? Is this phrase meant to be taken literally or figuratively? All the reader really gleans from this first line is that the story is being told from the first-person point of view and that the narrator has experienced some sort of revival, whether literal or metaphorical.

Such an opening puzzles and intrigues, inviting the reader to continue reading for further clarification. While the next lines offer some guidance, they also present new questions:

> Now I have fuzzy gray hair. I am pointing at it. It's like baby hair I am told.
> Two people once said I had pretty feet.
> I ripped off some leaves and clipped stem ends, with my new spouse, from a spray of fluorescent daisies he'd bought for me, and I asserted something unpleasant just then.
> Yes, the flowers were cheerful with aggressive petals, but in a few days I'd hate them when they were spent.
> The wrapping paper and a weedy mess had to be discarded, but first off thrust together. My job. (Williams, *Fine* 25-26)

We learn that the narrator is female[19] and the mention of the narrator's 'new spouse' clarifies her earlier comment about being 'back in the news with a changed appearance.' A scene now begins to emerge: an older woman stands at a kitchen table with her newlywed husband beside her; she points at her 'fuzzy gray hair' in a newspaper clipping of their wedding announcement, perhaps even commenting aloud that others have complimented her hair and feet before[20]; at the table, she arranges the 'fluorescent daisies' her husband bought her; she makes a rude comment to him about how the daisies will die soon. This is a common domestic scene, yet Williams manages to make it unfamiliar by choosing diction and syntax that alienates the reader. She calls the man her

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[19] While this is not explicitly stated, Williams consistently chooses heterosexual domesticity as the site of her fictional enterprise. She also has far more female narrators than male, though in many stories the gender of her narrator remains ambiguous. In most cases, I have opted for gender-neutral 'they' pronouns to preserve this ambiguity.

[20] While it is not certain that these sentences are spoken aloud, Williams often gives her characters bits of dialogue that are not placed in quotation marks. See *Vicky* 13, 32, 51; *Fine* 32, 63.

spouse rather than husband. The flowers are described as *fluorescent* and *aggressive* instead of colourful and they will soon be *spent* rather than wilted.

Williams uses the tactic of negation we saw in Woolf (*cheerful-aggressive*) as well as deceptive eye rhyme (*wrapping* and *weedy*) to create linguistic tension at the level of the sentence. These estranging word choices obscure what would otherwise be a series of simple perceptions and actions, forcing the reader to encounter the moment on the narrator's terms. Likewise, the syntax is highly parataxic, making leaps that challenge expectations for narrative continuity and progression. Conjunctions are used throughout to connect largely unrelated observations, forcing the reader to take on the labour of piecing together the events being narrated. The embedded clause 'with my new spouse' awkwardly interrupts the flow of the sentence, forcing the reader to reimagine the narrator clipping the flowers with another character nearby. This strategy recalls Woolf's penchant for conjuring a mental image only to revise it.

Up until now the observations, though scattered, have been somewhat connected. However, the story suddenly veers to consider a new perceptual object:

> Who knows why the dog thought to follow me up the stairs.
>
> Tufts of the dog's fur, all around his head, serve to distinguish him. It's as if he wears a military cap. He is dour sometimes and I have been deeply moved by what I take to be the dog's deep concerns.
>
> Often I pick him up—stop him mid-swagger. He didn't like it today and he pitched himself out of my arms. (Williams, *Fine* 26)

This shift is marked only by the usual paragraph indent, revealing the massive spectrum of connectivity that such a syntactic move encompasses. While some paragraph breaks continue the same thought from the previous sentence, others could be entirely different stories. She leverages the same cramped space of indentation to express vastly different logical leaps. The multi-referentiality of spacing, punctuation, and syntax is, in part, a result of the short form and its compression. In the dense, compact stories of Williams, this is obviously taken to the extreme.

This multi-referentiality, which is also used extensively by Woolf, means that ambiguity saturates every aspect of their writing. For instance, the dash used here serves as an interruptive rather than connective force. It is a grammatical complement to the action being described. At the same time, it functions as a thinly-veiled assertion of the narrator's power not only over her dog, but over her readers. Her dash stops us mid-swagger, reminding us that, if she so wants, she can take this story whichever direction she wishes. Yet, her readers have a certain power, too. They can pitch themselves out of the narrator's grasp by withholding the one thing that every narrator wants: their attention. This is the reason why a balance must be struck between the need to break the sentence and the need for narrative continuity. When experimental literature leans to far into linguistic play, it risks losing the reader's attention. As any glance at Amazon or Goodreads reviews of *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* will reveal, many readers feel that Williams often falls short. When Woolf published her collection of experimental short stories *Monday or Tuesday*, she received similar criticisms.

Yet, both authors make a conscious, careful, and sustained effort to mitigate their work's fragmentation by discovering new modes of connectivity. An essential part of their method is to ensnare and implicate the reader in their stories. They do this by breaking the sentence of its easy associations while leveraging its acoustic pleasures, ultimately putting both in service of the phenomenophilic. Returning to Williams's story, we see exactly this

> Drawers were open in the bedroom.
> Many times I feel the prickle of a nearby, unseen force I ought to pay attention to.
> I turned and saw my husband standing naked, with his clothes folded in his hands.
> Unbudgeable—but finally springing into massive brightness—is how I prefer to think of him.
> Actually, he said in these exact words: "I don't like you very much and I don't think you're fascinating." He put his clothes on, stepped out of the room.
> I walked out, too, out onto the rim of our neighborhood—into the park where I saw a lifeless rabbit—ears askew. As if prompted, it became a small waste bag with its tied-up loose ends in the air.

> A girl made a spectacle of herself, also, by stabbing at her front teeth with the tines of a plastic fork. Perhaps she was prodding dental wires and brackets, while an emaciated man at her side fed rice into his mouth from a white-foam square container, at top speed, crouched—swallowing at infrequent intervals.
>
> In came my husband to say, "Diane?" when I went home.
>
> "I am trying," I said, "to think of you in a new way. I'm not sure what—how that is." (Williams, *Fine* 26-27)

Parataxis is escalated here, not only in sentences like 'He put his clothes on, stepped out of the room,' but also in the way the action occurs in disconnected flashes. There is a suddenness to every detail: the move to the bedroom, the naked husband, the cold cruelty of the dialogue, the transition to the park and its array of unusual characters, the sudden return home, and the reveal that the narrator shares the author's name.[21] By not placing smooth transitions between the events, which are utterly commonplace and banal, each one is made surprising and exciting. By narrating these "rather trivial events with a disquieting degree of insistence and zeal," the narrator re-enchants the ordinary (Brandt 584). This act of re-enchantment is predicated on fascination, both the narrator's and the reader's, bearing in mind its Latin root *fascinare*, meaning to bewitch or put under a spell. Williams bewitches her reader with language, crafting enigmatic yet captivating phrases like 'finally springing into massive brightness' and, from earlier in the story, 'I have been deeply moved by what I take to be the dog's deep concerns'. In these instances, language becomes a polished veneer, a fascinating, crystalline object of contemplation.[22] Meaning, which lies tantalizingly in view, just below the glossy surface, is nonetheless inaccessible. However, it is this same lustrous and dazzling quality of Williams's sentences that gives her stories their momentum, enticing the reader onwards.

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[21] Many of Williams's narrators share her name, further complicating the relationship between writer and narrator. See *Vicky* 17; *Fine* 99.

[22] Williams's frequent mention of gems and jewellery in her fiction supports this reading as well. See *Vicky* 35, 45, 53, 62, 112, 116; *Fine* 13, 18, 20, 56, 68, 81, 90.

Following this section, the reader encounters a proper page break that signals a change of scene as well as temporal jump. The final portion of the story plays out around the dinner table:

> A fire had been lighted, drinks had been set out. Raw fish had been dipped into egg and bread crumbs and then sautéed. A small can of shoe polish was still out on the kitchen counter. We both like to keep our shoes shiny.
>
> How unlikely it was that our home was alight and that the dinner meal was served. I served it—our desideratum. The bread was dehydrated.
>
> I planned my future—that is, what to eat first—but not yet next and last—tap, tapping.
>
> My fork struck again lightly at several mounds of yellow vegetables.
>
> The dog was upright, slowly turning in place, and then he settled down into the shape of a wreath—something, of course, he'd thought of himself, but the decision was never extraordinary.
>
> And there is never any telling how long it will take my husband, if he will not hurry, to complete his dinner fare or to smooth out left-behind layers of it on the plate.
>
> "Are you all right?" he asked me—"Finished?"
>
> He loves spicy food, not this. My legs were stiff and my knees ached.
>
> I gave him a nod, made no apologies. Where were his?
>
> I didn't cry some.
>
> I must say that our behavior is continually under review and any one error alters our prestige, but there'll be none of that *lifting up mine eyes unto the hills*. (Williams, *Fine* 27-28; her italics)

The scene is set using short, parataxic sentences with simple object-verb structure. Action is deconstructed into its smallest components. This terse, matter-of-fact tone contributes to the palpable tension between the narrator and her husband as they eat. She refuses to think about him, instead focusing on the environment, food, and dog, though when she eventually does, it is with passive-aggressive annoyance. The story ends with the narrator confirming, by negation, her emotional distress, and stubbornly refusing to ask for help, quoting Psalm 121:1. Much like Williams's first sentences, her last sentences also share a certain impenetrability. In this one, her diction changes, adopting the distanced, administrative language of *behavior, review, error,* and *prestige.* Yet the last term reveals more than it obscures, coming from the Latin *praestigiae*, meaning a conjuring trick or illusion. This etymological clue offers a way into the final sentence. The characters in this story (including Diane, the narrator) are 'continually under review' and

any mistakes on their part will ruin the illusion. Despite this precarious situation, the narrator refuses to turn to God for help. We know from the title and stories of Williams's second collection, *Some Sexual Success Stories Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear,* that she figures the narrators of her stories to be God-like. Yet, in this case, it is precisely the narrator that is refusing to ask God for help. If the narrator is not God in this story, then who is? Perhaps it is the puppet master behind the puppet master, Diane Williams herself. Yet, by giving her narrator the name Diane, Williams seems to pre-empt this possibility, sending her reader in circles.

In Williams's fiction, her narratives are as much about the act of storytelling as they are about the people, places, and events that they depict. This holds true for Woolf as well. Both "Monday or Tuesday" and "To Revive a Person is No Slight Thing" are about their own reading experience, using action, place, and character as means to this end. Furthermore, these stories are the rule rather than the exception. This conscious cultivation of what C. Namwali Serpell has called a mode of uncertainty is predicated on an "agonistic, participatory reading experience" (1). Serpell's interest in uncertainty as an aesthetic mode is particularly relevant given her careful choice of words. She uses the word uncertainty "precisely because it captures the interactive, temporal, and experiential qualities to reading" (Serpell 9). Similarly, the word aesthetic is rooted in perception by the senses, and she chooses it as a means of asking "How does literary form shape what we perceive?" (Serpell 3). It is with these related ideas of aesthetic perception and uncertain reading that I understand Woolf and Williams's determination to break the sentence.

While the stylistic manifestations of their efforts differ quite radically, I have shown that there are many salient points of overlap between the ways they leverage punctuation, sound,

diction, syntax, and the paragraph in their work. These commonalities point to their shared desire to unsettle narrative convention and generate uncertainty. However, breaking the sentence should never be an end in itself. The sentence is, after all, the building block of fiction. How do Woolf and Williams go on to build larger structures of narrative with this damaged tool? The answer to this question requires that we return to the subject matter of their short fiction. As cultivators of particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences, Woolf and Williams seek to give serious literary consideration not only to the quotidian, but to those aspects of the everyday that are themselves neglected. They break the sentence and introduce fragmentation at every level of their stories as a means of reorienting their readers towards these marginal perceptions.

To do all of this, they not only take risks, but they must also make sacrifices. Plot is the first thing to go, which is predictable given the focus on present experience. Instead of plot, Woolf and Williams structure their stories using strings of tenuously related perceptions and sensations. Parataxis abounds, forcing the reader to make leaps to sustain any sense of continuity by interpolating between the gaps. Mary Rohrberger, speaking about the inconclusive short story, argues that it "makes of readers co-creators, active participants in the revelation of meaning, and it is in this interaction that satisfaction ultimately rests" (Rohrberger 43). Inconclusivity abounds in the short stories of Woolf and Williams, shifting the responsibility to read along narrative lines onto the reader. Yet, I have not yet considered how this fragmentation affects character, that other behemoth of narrative. In the short story, John Gerlach believes that "[p]lot is not necessary, nor is a fleshed-out sense of character and setting, as long as the reader is prodded to think in terms of character and motive" (Gerlach 80). Yet, can we say that Woolf and Williams prod their readers to think in terms of character and motive? If anything, it seems that they deconstruct this impulse altogether. This question will be the central concern of my

next chapter, which looks at how breaking the sentence affects how Woolf and Williams construct character in their short stories.

Chapter III: Conjuring Character

I would be hard pressed to say where the painting is that I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

So far, this project has been concerned with sentences, perception, and their relationship to one another in the short fiction of Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams. I began by positioning the short story as the ideal form for writing the perceptual moment; its condensed reading experience means that each sentence carries more weight than it would in longer fiction, allowing for the sentence to be foregrounded as a structural and perceptual unit. As a result, the short story is not only able to showcase perceptual experience, but also exploit the reader's perception and attention towards this end. In their literary attention to the phenomenophilic, Woolf and Williams foreground the sentence as a perceptual object in their stories. They break the sentence of its narrative impulse, fragmenting their prose as a means of writing fragmentary experience. Both authors deny their readers continuity and cohesion, asking them to read between the gaps for story.

Woolf and Williams experiment with the limits of storytelling by establishing narrative momentum below the level of the sentence. They elide basic questions like the who, what, when, where, and—most importantly—why of their stories, coaxing their readers away from thinking about story in these terms. Their fiction consistently shows that "story is an invitation to construct explanations, explanations about causality, connections, motives. When we feel we are constructing them significantly […] we sense story" (Gerlach 79-80). Given Woolf and Williams's interest in momentary perceptual experience, it is unsurprising that plot is missing in many of their works. But what becomes of character? How do their respective sentence-oriented aesthetics handle the demands of characterization? To answer these questions, I will begin by

considering Woolf's critical reservations about character before turning to hers and Williams's own solutions to these problems.

The treatment of character in fiction is a sustained interest for Virginia Woolf that she tackles in many of her essays, most famously in "Character in Fiction" (1924). In this essay, Woolf begins by quoting Arnold Bennett's belief that the "foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else" (qtd. in *CE* III: 421). While she does not entirely disagree with this statement, she does take issue with the approach to character practiced by Bennett and the other Edwardians. Woolf offers an anecdote about riding the train with an unknown woman and experiencing the impulse to construct an identity for her. She notes how simply looking at the woman makes "someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her" (Woolf, *CE* III: 425). Giving her the name Mrs Brown, Woolf proceeds to describe how Bennett would characterize her. She explains that in his efforts to give a sense of reality to a character, he offers endless description of "the fabric of things," which paints a detailed picture of everything other than the person in question (Woolf, *CE* III: 432). Woolf ultimately suggests that Bennett "is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" (*CE* III: 430). While Bennett believes that Woolf's contemporaries have failed to create realistic characters, Woolf disagrees, suggesting that what is considered realistic is up for debate.

Woolf goes on to insist that the conventions and tools used by the Edwardians to represent reality must be abandoned by the new generation of fiction writers: "For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" (*CE* III: 430). In their place, she advocates for a more elliptical mode of characterization. Rather than abandoning character, she wants to revitalize it, "to experiment with one thing and another; to try this sentence and that, referring each word to

my vision, matching it as exactly as possible, and knowing that somehow I had to find a common ground between us, a convention which would not seem to you too odd, unreal, and farfetched to believe in" (*CE* III: 432). Woolf concludes the essay by appealing to her reader to "[t]olerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause" (*CE* III: 436). In doing so, she advocates for an approach to character that is experimental, fragmented, and participatory.

In "Character in Fiction," Woolf seeks new possibilities for characterization that move away from the deep psychological realism of the traditional novel. While she is speaking explicitly about the novel in this essay, her short stories were the "laboratories of her fiction" that she used as a space to experiment with these new possibilities (Reynier 113). In fact, an earlier version of Mrs Brown, the unknown woman on the train, appears in Woolf's short story "An Unwritten Novel" (1920). This story is told by an unidentified narrator who shares a train carriage with an older woman. The narrator spends the entire journey constructing a robust personality and personal history for the woman, who is given the name Minnie Marsh. This extended act of characterization stands in place of plot, recalling Woolf's other phenomenophilic, present-oriented fiction. Likewise, the narrator mixes perception of the woman's appearance and behaviour with imaginative logic to provide a 'reading' of Minnie Marsh.

Like in "The Mark on the Wall," the narrator moves between perception and imagination freely. However, while the mark is a generative source of thought, Minnie's restless movement repeatedly interrupts the narrator's fancy: "If you would only sit still. She's moved her knees—the map's in bits again" (Woolf, *SF* 117). Unlike the mark, the woman's animacy poses a constant threat to the narrator's power, revealing "the paranoiac author who is no longer in a

privileged position" (Skrbic 41). This is revealed by the end of the story, when the image of the woman as a bitter, lonely spinster is undermined by the appearance of her son at the station: "Off they go, down the road, side by side. . . . Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life's bare as bone" (Woolf, *SF* 121). This unveiling destabilizes the authority of the narrator, encouraging the reader to question not only the interpretation of the facts, but the facts themselves and, as a result, the very possibility of character in fiction.

Unlike the other stories I have considered, "An Unwritten Novel" functions primarily as satire. It parodies the Edwardian approach to character-building that Woolf criticizes so ardently in "Character in Fiction." The narrator constructs an entire fictitious background for Minnie Marsh only to have it deflated by the end of the story. Yet, the piece does not end on the narrator's defeat and dejection. Instead, the final paragraph implies a hopeful shift: "And yet the last look of them [...] brims me with wonder—floods me anew" (Woolf, *SF* 121). The narrator begins the process of invention 'anew' by imagining even more possibilities for the woman and her son. Of course, given the satirical nature of this story, the reader is invited to be suspicious of this synthesized epiphany that "whirls and surges—floats me afresh!" as it is likely that any new characterizations will be similarly misguided (121).

Yet, despite—or, more accurately, alongside—this suspicion, Woolf is suggesting an alternative to the Edwardian model of character-building. As the woman and her son walk away, the prose style changes. The previously billowing, digressive sentences give way to short, fragmented impressions: "People drive this way and that. The white light splutters and pours. Plate-glass windows. Carnations; chrysanthemums. Ivy in dark gardens. Milk carts at the door" (Woolf, *SF* 121). Absent is the authorial analysis that marks the rest of the story. These sentences

recall the parataxic language of "Monday or Tuesday" in their focus on concrete, sensory particulars. Character is alluded to in these abstract fragments, showing that "[l]ike the fragments of eggshell on Minnie's lap, the self is a puzzle the writer tries to piece together; like Minnie's glove, it needs mending" (Reynier 95). This mending cannot be done by the narrator, who is implicitly invested with authorial power. Instead, it must be undertaken by the reader. As Pamela Caughie notes, "Woolf's use of discontinuities [...] explores and discloses the ways in which the reader makes those connections" (92). Thus, the participatory reading strategy I traced in "Monday or Tuesday" ultimately returns at the end of "An Unwritten Novel."

By using the first part of the story to explicitly show how one can read incorrectly, Woolf warns against the perils of such an active reading strategy. She straddles the fine line between licensing her readers to imagine people freely and cautioning them against reductive projection. In doing so, she reveals that "the process of 'reading' people is subject to the same decoding problems and inaccuracies that we face in reading fiction" (Skrbic 42). The narrator of "An Unwritten Novel" leaves nothing for the reader to imagine about Minnie Marsh: every detail is accompanied by conjecture. The logical leap from perception to assumption is shown to be reductive and limited. At the end of "An Unwritten Novel" as well as in other stories, Woolf champions a "strategy built on ellipsis, ambiguity, and open-endedness" and shows it to be "more legitimate than any static portrayal of theme" because it demands readerly rather than authorial intervention (Skrbic 41). By forcing the reader to interpolate character, this strategy draws attention to the unfinalizability of the process of reading other people, both in fiction and reality.

To advance this view, "An Unwritten Novel" uses parody to simultaneously critique one method of characterization while also offering an alternative approach. As Laura Rodríguez

notes, “parody is not only the means of unmasking the literary inadequacies of a certain convention, but the necessary step within the creative process which enables new forms to appear and opens new possibilities for the artist” (79). Through parody, Woolf deconstructs the Edwardian model of character, “emphasiz[ing] rather than conceal[ing] all the structural elements” of the process (Skrbic 41). In this way, the ‘unwritten novel’ of the title “does not refer to some phantom novel but to the process of unwriting it, taking it apart to show how it could be put together” differently (Caughie 93). While the sheer amount of dashes and fragmentation in this story recalls the way that Woolf breaks the sentence in other texts, the technique here is not the same. Breaking the sentence is meant to *facilitate* alternative modes of narrative integration, not *foreclose* them. The fractures in this story leave no space for the reader to generate their own sense of character.

If “An Unwritten Novel” purposely fails to break the sentence, then where can we look for an example of how Woolf’s poetics of the sentence has felt effects on her depiction of character? “The Evening Party” offers one example of this with its unconventional reliance on dialogue as the primary narrative technique. While the story remained unpublished during Woolf’s lifetime, it was likely written during the same period that she was working on the 1921 collection *Monday or Tuesday*. “The Evening Party” opens with a short interior monologue by one of the partygoers, followed by free-floating dialogue that makes up the rest of the story. The narrator of this opening section walks along the street at dusk, trying to find the host’s house, and once they enter the party the story shifts into pure dialogue. Woolf resists the *I* pronoun in this opening section, instead alternating between *me* and *we*. The effect of this is a sense of collective identity located in a single body. The embodiment of the narrator is emphasized by the description of the wind “lifting my cloak,” while at the same time they seem to move unseen

through the house: “Something has dissolved my face. Through the mist of silver candle light it scarcely appears. People pass me without seeing me” (Woolf, *SF* 96). Woolf was interested in rendering a kind of “party consciousness” in this story, blurring the line between the individual and their social environment (Woolf, *Diary* III: 12).

This initial prelude opens with the hesitant imperative “Ah, but let us wait a little!”—an entreaty that is repeated in the next paragraph: “Ah,—round the corner, in the middle, there where the door stands open—wait a moment” (Woolf, *SF* 96). The narrator wants to linger in the moment of anticipation, forcing the reader to as well. As the narrator stands at the threshold, about to enter the thrall of the party, they are fascinated by the phenomenophilic. All the detail given is particular, sensory, and transient, like how the “the yellow and red panes of the ocean liners cast for a moment a spot upon the swimming blue” (Woolf, *SF* 96). The singular point of view implied by these observations is at odds with the repeated use of the first person plural pronoun that suggests a collective identity. Lines like “Let us watch the people” and “Come, or we shall be late” invite the reader to “see according to, or with” the narrator (Woolf, *SF* 96; Merleau-Ponty 126). Already, the story begins to blur the firm lines we draw around character. Not only does the narrator feel that “something has dissolved my face” upon entering the house, but the narrative suddenly switches to unmoored dialogue for the remainder of the story (Woolf, *SF* 96). There is tension between the invitation for the reader to inhabit the narrator’s point of view and the repeated subversion of that perspective’s stability.

The dialogue in “The Evening Party” is never explicitly attributed to any specific character or speaker. Woolf draws attention to how the conventions of fiction provide a scaffolding for reading character by removing these aids. By refusing to provide even the basic markers of identity, such as name, title, or gender, the story encourages alternative modes of

reading character in fiction. Character only emerges relationally, such as when a writer is introduced to a literary critic named Mr Nevill or a woman is introduced to someone who knows her mother. It is possible that the writer and the woman are the same person, but it remains ambiguous. Woolf is highlighting the way identity is socially and environmentally embedded with this reliance on ambiguity. Her lack of clear signposting means that readers must navigate the text one utterance at a time, relying contextually on what is implied by each speech-act if they want to orient themselves in narrative space. This tactic demands careful re-reading with an attention to individualized language patterns, making the act of discerning character a sustained, active effort.

Thus, "Woolf registers character at a local level through strongly marked speech patterns" in this story (Skrbic 45). In this comment, Skrbic is drawing on Teun van Dijk's distinction between 'global' and 'local' text processing strategies and uses it to suggest that, unlike novels, short stories are "read nonserially, more frequently focusing attention on certain words" (Skrbic 43). The local processing of short fiction allows for character development both above and below the level of the sentence. In "The Evening Party," the reader has no choice but to resort to syntactic speech patterns if they want to distinguish between the various voices. While reading between the lines is common in the short story, given its dependence on elision as a narrative technique, Woolf directs her readers to the line itself. The possibility of seeing patterns across speech acts is impeded by Woolf's refusal to note who is speaking at any given moment. She forces us to attend to the surfaces of language by withholding all other narrative information. In doing so, she reveals that the semantic content of words offers much less insight into character than one might expect.

"The Evening Party" also withholds all but one sensory modality, offering auditory perception as the only means of accessing the story. The disorientation of this choice is compounded by the translation of spoken dialogue into written language. This mediation throws into relief how language is a full-bodied phenomenon that relies on paralinguistic features such as intonation, inflection, body language, and context for meaning. The lack of these features places pressure on the reader to compensate by constructing their own visual scene to accompany the verbal interactions. Yet, Woolf provides the reader with no supporting detail beyond the dialogue to do this, making what should be a simple, unconscious task difficult and laborious. By rendering character only through unmarked speech, Woolf rejects the authority of a single, unified point of view in favour of a collective, distributed sensory modality, where "[t]he repetition of 'we' is a global strategy, a gesture toward unifying the whole" (Skrbic 46). She offers a character's everyday speech as an alternative to authorial description of personality. Such difficulty not only draws readerly attention to this unconscious labour, but it also urges the reader to find alternative methods for imagining character.

The thematic interest in the interactional nature of language that runs through "The Evening Party" offers a parallel for this co-constructed feature of character. Recalling Woolf's comment in "Character in Fiction" about "the appalling effort of saying what I meant" (Woolf, *CE* III: 432), two characters discuss the difficulty of sharing subjective experience, specifically the phenomenophilic:

> 'Don't you remember in early childhood, when, in play or talk, as one stepped across the puddle or reached the window on the landing, some imperceptible shock froze the universe to a solid ball or crystal which one held for a moment […] But later these crystal globes dissolve as one holds them […] See what comes of trying to say what one means! Nonsense!'
>
> 'Precisely. Yet how sad a thing is sense! How vast a renunciation it represents! Listen for a moment. Distinguish one among the voices. Now. "So cold it must seem after India. Seven years too. But habit is everything." That's sense. That's agreement. They've fixed

> their eyes upon something visible to each of them. They attempt no more to look upon the little spark of light, the little purple shadow which may be fruitful land on the verge of the horizon, or only a flying gleam of water. It's all compromise—all safety, the general intercourse of human beings. There we discover nothing; we cease to explore; we cease to believe that there is anything to discover. "Nonsense" you say; meaning that I shan't see your crystal globe; and I'm half ashamed to try.'
>
> 'Speech is an old torn net, through which the fish escape as one casts it over them. Perhaps silence is better. Let us try it. Come to the window.' (Woolf, *SF* 98-99)

Here, the first speaker worries that their phenomenophilic experience, which they describe as an 'imperceptible shock' that 'froze the universe to a solid ball or crystal' (recalling Paterian language), cannot be expressed in language. They lament that attempting to share this experience with another person yields only nonsense. The second speaker acknowledges this difficulty, yet insists that refusing to even try to render the phenomenophilic is itself a renunciation. By speaking only 'sense,' people remain in the 'safety' of a shared language rather than trying to 'explore' and 'discover' new linguistic possibilities. In response, the first speaker suggests a move away from language and towards silence, inviting their interlocutor to look out the window with them.

While silence might appear to be a renunciation rather than an attempt at communication, the shared act of looking offers an alternative to speech: "The evocation of silence and nonverbal strategies that enhance the interpretation of character creates a dialogue in which the reader is one of the integral components" (Skrbic 44-45). Seeing *with* another, recalling Merleau-Ponty's phrasing, is held out to the reader as a strategy for approaching character. By withholding visual description, dialogue becomes the only means of accessing the scene. Instead of using spoken language as one among many ways of creating a robust, realistic character, Woolf makes their speech the entire story. These fragments of dialogue serve as windows onto the scene, but rather than giving interior access to character, they each offer an idiosyncratic view of the world. Woolf uses literary character to offer a way of seeing the world differently and, in the same gesture,

rejects the notion that character implies a stable, interior personality. The difficulty posed by the experimental techniques of this story demand readerly intervention, an invitation to come to the window, as it were.

Thus, the solution that Woolf offers in "The Evening Party" to the problem of literary character hinges on readerly perception. She writes character in glimpses and fragments rather than as a stable, unified whole, leveraging a character's own perceptual experience to create a sense of personality. The reader can access the identity of each speaker only by seeing the world through their language. The short story provides a platform for this experimental approach to character, as it "recognizes that full comprehension of a particular kind in the reader, like full apprehension of a particular kind in the writer, is something of limited duration" (Gordimer 265). In short fiction, "[p]lot is not necessary, nor is a fleshed-out sense of character and setting, as long as the reader is prodded to think in terms of character and motive" (Gerlach 80). Woolf elides the conventions of characterization and relies on the affective power of her sentences as a means of prodding her readers towards this end. In doing so, she troubles the usual relationship between reality, language, and character. Instead of manipulating literary language to construct a realistic depiction of character, Woolf gives her readers access to reality only through a specific character's linguistic lens.

Woolf's stream of consciousness technique, which she uses in both her novels and shorter fiction, is predicated on this approach to characterization. However, I have highlighted the short story because it allows for more radical experiments with character. The short, contained reading experience of the short story means that readers are more willing to tolerate plotlessness and experimentation than in an extended narrative. Also, as I argued in my first chapter, the brevity of the short form complements the focus on phenomenophilic experience that this method

demands. Each sentence is given more weight in shorter fiction, inviting the reader to attend more closely to linguistic play. Furthermore, narrative continuity, which is essential for longer fiction, places certain demands on the sentence to function as a tractional, load-bearing unit. As a result, the short story can break the sentence in ways that the novel cannot, leveraging it to emotional ends. Together, these features enable an experimental approach to character that is particular to the short form.

This affective, sentence-oriented technique is characteristic of Diane Williams's fiction as well. When compared to Woolf, who is known for her deep investment in character and interiority, Williams appears to outright reject Bennett's claim that the "foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else" (qtd. in Woolf, *CE* III: 421). She makes no attempt at traditional realism. Instead, her characters speak and act in ways that run counter to our expectations for literature. The way her characters are described repeatedly resist conventional understandings of people and their motivations. Their affect and behavior may at times seem unrealistic, but, in writing character in this way, Williams asks us to question what expectations we bring to fiction that aims to represent reality. By refusing to give us access to her characters along recognizable lines, they come to occupy a kind of uncanny valley. Despite the radical stylistic differences between Woolf and Williams, they are both using character as an invitation for readers to cultivate new linguistic relations to the world. However, Williams is willing to demand more from her readers in those efforts.

To demonstrate this, let us consider Williams's story "People of the Week," which has many similarities to Woolf's "The Evening Party." Both rely heavily on dialogue, blur the identities of the speakers, and feature a party as the central conceit. The four lines of dialogue that open the story feature a proliferation of names, frustrating any attempt to imagine

robust personalities for each one. Given that seven people are named in less than 250 words, it seems unlikely that this story can develop any of them with enough detail to convince the reader that they are realistic. While no one would call these robust characters, neither are they transparent. Instead, they are opaque, often inscrutable, such as when Anita is "satisfied that nothing of much depth or subtlety would ever occur to her again" (Williams, *Fine* 38). The specificity of this statement gives Anita a sense of reality. Notably, this detail is provided by the narrator and stands in contrast to the simplicity of the spoken dialogue: "'I don't want to see Tim. Why would I want to see Tim? Who is Anita? I want to thank Anita'" (37). Williams writes dialogue hyper-realistically, often transcribing everyday conversations word-for-word. Despite this, the parataxis, repetition, and simple syntax of her character's speech is not what comes to mind when one thinks of 'realistic' dialogue. The fact is that what counts as realistic in fiction is not necessarily how we speak in real life.

If this story was presented like Woolf's "The Evening Party," with the dialogue becoming the whole narrative, it would surely fail. Unlike in "An Unwritten Novel," where the narrator's ceaseless interpretation of Minnie is reductive and constraining, the narrator's quips in "People of the Week" are what give the characters a sense of depth and opacity. The liveliness and humour of this story relies entirely on the narrator's commentary. It is almost as if someone has given the narrator an audio feed of the party (akin to Woolf's story) and asked them to provide their own improvised commentary for that conversation. For instance, when Tim responds to a name that is not his own, the narrator explains that he "turned thinking that someone had mistaken him for Dale" (37). This explanation, while plausible, also seems like pure speculation, as though the narrator is watching this unfold and making it up as they go. This incident seems to remind the narrator of a dog that responds eagerly to any name, because the

narrator proceeds to imagine Tim as a dog "standing up only on his hind legs, shaking hands with a forepaw" (37-38). However, the narrator not only imagines this, but they proceed to attribute this perception to Tim, saying that he "felt" this way himself (37). What begins as a fleeting perceptual thought by the narrator becomes Tim's subjective experience.

It is clear from this moment that "People of the Week" is far more about the narrator than any of the named characters. The narrator struggles to stay out of the fray, yet when Imogene asks, "'What was her name?'" at the end, the narrator cannot help but reply "That was Jasmine, who deals sensibly with everyone" (38). The final comment about how these people "have acquired love, wealth, and fame, but they don't think they've gotten enough reward for all that" seems to show the narrator chastising the characters of the story for wanting more than the narrator has provided them (38). This tension between the narrator and those they narrate is present throughout Williams's fiction. As Sims reminds us, "the narrator is the main character of every Williams story" (30). Every story somehow becomes about them even if try their best to tell it straight. In this way, Williams is subtly enacting Woolf's model of character as a shared act of looking. If the central character is the *narrator* rather than the *narrated*, any linguistic eccentricities reveal the perceptual world as it appears to that narrator, offering a window onto reality that invites us to actively embody their perspective.

We see the subtlety of this tactic in Williams's "The Great Passion and Its Context," which complements Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel" in much the same way that "People of the Week" does "The Evening Party." This story similarly features a narrator's account of an unknown woman on a train. While equally plotless, this narrative is even more fleeting, with the entire scene spanning the time it takes the woman to get up from her seat and throw something in the trash. Unlike "People of the Week," this one has no dialogue and appears to present the

woman's thoughts and perceptions directly. The story is presented in what appears to be free-indirect discourse, which is usually used to provide direct access to a character's consciousness using the third person. However, any reader familiar with Williams will come to every story with a good deal of suspicion, knowing that it is also possible that the narrator is simply giving the illusion of access. This possibility creates another link between this story and Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel," given that the narrator's idea of Minnie Marsh is shown to be false, showing the narrator to be far from omniscient.

While in Woolf's story this revelation comes at the end, Williams never explicitly reveals her narrator's presence in "The Great Passion and Its Context." However, there are small moments that indicate that there is a narrator present whose authority might be worth questioning. For instance, the narration seems to fall briefly out of sync with the woman's actions at the start of the second paragraph: "She has her shoes back on, because she had to get up to dispose of her lunchtime detritus" (Williams, *Fine* 43). The announcement of the woman's action comes first, followed by a comma and then an additional clause that offers a motivation for that action. Williams uses syntax to communicate temporal sequence, giving the sense that the action was unexpected. It is as though the narrator looked away for a moment only for the woman to suddenly move, forcing them to quickly catch up. This recalls Minnie Marsh's fidgeting and how it continually frustrates her respective narrator.

In the next paragraph, the narrator notes how the train is passing a city center, with "ice skaters who put their feet down, somewhat decisively, all over the rink!" (44). The legs of the skaters are described as "bowed […] but they're none of them hobbling" (44). This comment is likely invention rather than perception, given that the speed and movement of the train would prevent such close observation. The description of the skaters' legs is immediately followed by a

mention of the woman's injured foot. It is as though, prompted by the thought of the skaters' legs, the narrator suddenly thinks to give the woman a foot injury. The narrator seems to be improvising here, much like in "People of the Week."

The distance between the narrator and woman shows itself again in a series of fragmented questions: "What's still to come?—a warm flat landscape?—a shallow swimming pool?—the complete ruin of her health?—her absolute devotion to anyone?" (44). The substance of these questions seems to refer to the perceptual landscape seen through the train window, only to unexpectedly shift to consider the woman's existential (or narrative) prospects. The heavy use of em dashes and parataxis evoke the experience of looking out a train window at the quickly passing landmarks, as though the narrator is looking to the external world to supply fodder for the portrait they are trying to sketch of this woman.

The final line of the story provides a metafictional nod to the dual presence of the woman and her narrator: "Children, who belong to another woman three rows up ahead, are singing a duet—two boys—in unison, and then in contrary motion. They offer their share of resistance to you name it!—in a remote and difficult key, and in poor taste artistically" (44). The two voices 'in unison, and then in contrary motion' suggest the tension that is playing out between the woman and the narrator's attempts to pin her down. Like Minnie Marsh, the woman's animacy acts as 'resistance to you name it!'—that is, the narrator themself, who remains unnamed and at the mercy of the reader's own power of interpretation. Whether the narrator's presentation of this woman is in good or 'poor taste artistically' is up to us.

This reference to dual voices with the boys' duet provides a clue about the narrator that is also latent in the title of the story. "The Great Passion and its Context" takes its name from one of the chapter headings in Christoph Wolff's *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*

(2000), which discusses Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew*, BWV 244. As one of Bach's most famous oratorios—which differ from operas in their lack of elaborate props and costumes, as well as the lack of interaction between characters, providing a noteworthy parallel to the short story form—the *St. Matthew Passion* is also known as the "Great Passion" (Wolff 288). Based on Matthew's account of the Passion of Jesus, Bach constructed this piece by dividing "the entire ensemble into two vocal-instrumental bodies" (Wolff 297). In its composition, it was "carefully laid out and written in two colours of ink, red and dark brown" (Wolff 298). This duality in Bach's 'Great Passion' suggests that there are also two people in Williams's "The Great Passion and Its Context," with one interpreting the other. The narrator is not simply a transparent view onto the scene, like in traditional free-indirect discourse. Rather, like in "People of the Week," this interpreter has a presence not typical of third-person narrators.

Williams, unlike most fiction writers, asks us to remember that there is always a subjective 'I' as well as an embodied 'eye' behind the third person perspective, and that such a perspective is never as omniscient as it may seem. Take, for example, the story "Shelter," which begins:

> Derek is somebody everybody loves because everybody loves what Derek loves and he is handsome. I've left Derek behind on the veranda, in the vestibule, in the passage. He is fifty-two years old and behaving properly. Every day he thinks of what to do and wonderfully he tries to do it. I can make out his force, his shape. He sits at a shrewd distance from the dining parlor, now. (Williams, *Vicky* 107)

The story opens with a convoluted explanation of what makes Derek likeable, attributing it to his good tastes and good looks. Both are behavioural and visual markers rather than what are typically thought of as stable character traits. The narrator uses the first person to talk about Derek, adopting a tone one would use to speak about a child that needs constant supervision. This makes it difficult for the reader to determine the relationship between the narrator and

reader: are they husband and wife, friends, acquaintances, maybe strangers who have just met? The narrator moves through the house interacting with objects—"I recorked a bottle and stowed a jar of mayonnaise" (108)—all the while acting as if they owned the place. Perhaps they do.

Recalling Woolf's accusation that Arnold Bennett "is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" (*CE* III: 430), Williams seems to frame this story as a kind of house, with "pretty rooms, opening out on either side" and the "calming wave of walls and ceilings" (*Vicky* 107, 108). If "Shelter" can be construed as a house, which its title invites, then the narrator of this story clearly runs the place. Within the frame of the story, "Derek's task is to provide continuity from room to room—thoughtfully—consistent with ensuring that no violent breaks occur" (Williams, *Vicky* 108). Characters in a story, according to this narrator at least, are useful only insofar as they provide continuity with their actions and thought. They can connect fragments into a larger whole, giving a felt unity to fictional experience. While this is typically considered to be the role of the narrator or author, Williams has her narrator push it onto the characters, like an unpleasant task handed down the chain of command. The characters of a given story are at the bottom of that chain, unable to pass it off to anyone else.

Characters, according to this view, find themselves at the lowest level of the fictional hierarchy. Through this metaphor, it appears that Williams is offering a critique of experimental writers who privilege innovation in form and language over innovation in representing character. As Sims argues:

> Williams does not, in place of a fully formed, three-dimensional character, give us an ironic caricature of one, the usual "experimental" solution to the problem of characterization; instead she frolics, with great purpose [...] but what is significant, remarkable even, is that Williams manages to move us even while she deconstructs "character" and "story" and likewise denatures language itself. (8-9)

Williams wants to explore alternative vocabularies for character in experimental fiction and "frees herself to characterize who and what she will as she pleases. By recognizing the limits of such a technique or tool, she exercises a more genuine power in delineating characters" (Sims 31). Furthermore, she does not believe that an interest in the sentence and its effects means a disinterest in characters and their affects. Her solution to this dichotomy of linguistic play and character-building is to intertwine the two. Williams's narrators become mobius strips that entangle language and character, making it impossible to discern where one ends and the other begins. Or perhaps an even better analogy is that of a Penrose triangle (fig. 1), an optical illusion famously described as illustrating "impossibility in its purest form" (Seckel 83). That the short story form is so often described using adjectives like distilled, compressed, dense, elliptical, unified, etc. makes this analogy even more apt.

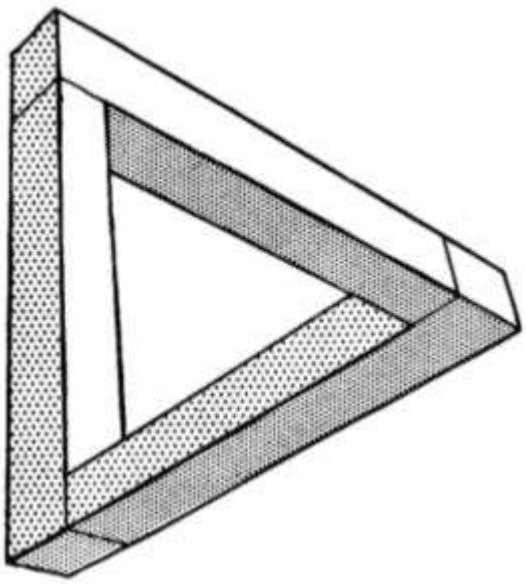

Fig. 1 Penrose triangle as illustrated by L.S. Penrose and R. Penrose in "Impossible objects: A special type of optical illusion," *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1958, pp. 31-33.

Williams's fiction is thematically interested in misperception, illusion, and magic, and she will often use perceptual misdirection as a technique in her stories. For instance, in "Lamb Chops, Cod," the narration begins from a detached, third-person perspective, giving the impression that the narrator is providing a transparent view onto the scene. However, there is a sudden shift to the first person, followed by a revelation that the "she" being narrated is the narrator's own mother (Williams, *Fine* 93). This unveiling shows the narrator to be an embodied character in the story rather than a purely omniscient voice. Such sleight of hand is at the heart of all of Williams' stories, though it moves in and out of focus. She wants to disorient the reader, to "refute or to undo the given" as she admits in an interview with *The White Review.* In revealing the narrator to have a personal stake in the story being told, she pulls back the curtain with a magician-like flourish, re-embodying the spectre of the narrating voice. Her choice to defer this knowledge, to ask the reader to be invested in an unnamed 'she' and 'he' without any good reason, is to ask for the audience to participate in the illusion.

In "Perform Small Tasks," the metaphor of the magic trick is invoked by the first person narrator, who asks himself "what darker purpose is being served when a magician pulls his rabbit out of the hat" (Williams, *Fine* 106). The story closes on a similar image, making a metafictional nod towards what is perhaps the narrator's 'darker purpose': "Am I not like the vanishing bead? Presto! Place me inside of any paper cup. In due course I am in my own pocket, when I cap—carry through, or when I conclude" (107). The narrator functions as the vanishing bead in many of Williams' stories, dressing up the world with eccentric language to make it appear, for a moment, extraordinary. This radical mobility is the trick up Williams' sleeve, the ability to make her narrator transparent or opaque at the drop of a pronoun. While in reviews her stories are described as riddles, as though they are something to be solved, they are better thought of as

illusions or magic tricks. Her narrators dazzle and distract with linguistic flourish, encouraging us to "Fix your mind on the sweep of the action—on the swish, on the smash, and the bang" (Williams, *Vicky* 59). These perceptual tricks force us to see the ordinary, everyday world through their eyes.

This thematic and technical interest in illusion and misperception is also evident throughout Woolf's short fiction. Like Williams, Woolf often employs the structure of illusion to challenge the transparency of her narrators. For instance, in "Three Pictures," written in 1929 and published in *The Death of the Moth* (1942), she uses a stereoscopic effect to undermine the narrator's authority. A stereoscope is a device that allows the simultaneous viewing of two different images, one through each eye, producing the illusion of three-dimensional depth. The separate images are typically depicting the same scene from different angles, creating in their concurrent viewing the perception of three-dimensional space. "Three Pictures" is presented in three distinct sections and each depicts its own contained scene. In the first 'picture,' the narrator witnesses a reunion between a sailor and his wife and "[f]or some time the picture floated in my eyes, making most things appear much brighter, warmer, and simpler than usual" (Woolf, *SF* 228). In the second, the narrator hears a loud unidentified cry in the middle of the night and wonders what caused it. The dissonance of the affable first picture with the ominous second prevents the narrator from seeing any connection between them. In the third section, the narrator notices a grave being dug and learns that the sailor from the first picture has died and that it was his wife who screamed in the night. Next to the grave, the gravedigger's family is having a picnic. Thus, the dissonance of the first two sections are superimposed stereoscopically in the third, using illusion to reveal the blind spot of the narrator and to demand a revaluation of the previous pictures.

Illusion returns as a trope in "The Fascination of the Pool" (1929), where the narrator looks into a pool of water and imagines that they can see and hear the memories of others who have done the same. The pool's fascination (recalling its Latin root *fascinare*, meaning 'to bewitch') is attributed to the fact that "it held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, one floating on top of another, almost disembodied" (Woolf, *SF* 226). Different characters begin to emerge from the depths, each telling their own story in watery fragments. Here, character becomes a matter of perception and perspective; the verb 'seemed' dominates the story and the sustained 'I' voice is used to present both the perspectives of these characters as well as that of the narrator. Rather than being stable and metaphysical, identity is shown to be mutable and material: "Among all these liquid thoughts some seemed to stick together and to form recognisable people—just for a moment" (226). The impulse to see beyond the voice for something fixed, to "see deeper, through reflections, through the faces through the voices to the bottom" proves useless, as "there was always something else" (227). Woolf seems to suggest with this story that character is a conjuring trick, a phenomenophilic glimpse that exists only in the active moment of perception.

In tracing this link between character and illusion in Woolf and Williams, I am not suggesting that they believe character, identity, or selfhood to be purely constructed. On the contrary, the metaphor of the conjuring trick is meant to demonstrate the highly interactional, participatory nature of character in fiction. Illusions rely on the interplay of perception and imagination, while also demanding a willingness to see according to the vision of another. To succeed, a magic trick often invites the participation of their audience, encouraging belief through complicity. Woolf and Williams employ a similar tactic, demanding active labour from their readers to complete the illusion. The ellipsis that underpins their fiction cultivates divergent

modes of reading character. By breaking the sentence, they can maintain complete control over this process, directing and redirecting attention to sustain the illusion. Like the magician, who dresses up a simple trick with fanfare and flourish, Woolf and Williams rely on style to pull off their fictional stunts. Their style can be seen even at the smallest levels of language and it is this stylistic control that enables their fiction to provide a window that both fascinates the reader and expands how we think about the psychological lives of other people.

The short story, with its contained reading experience and ability to exploit fleeting perception, is the perfect stage for these conjuring acts. Much like a magic trick, the short story "has the mysterious property of illuminating something beyond itself" by "cut[ting] off a fragment of reality in such a way that the fragment acts like an explosion that opens up a more ample reality" (Cortázar 246). Short stories conceal their joints and margins to create the illusion of effortlessness and simplicity, when in fact their composition demands rigorous attention to all elements of storytelling. They ask to be experienced rather than dissected, felt rather than analyzed. This affective, holistic reading experience allows alternative vocabularies for character to emerge that move away from representational depictions of character and towards an embodied mode of perception through individualized language.

Conclusion

In this critical attention to the sentence, perception, and their entanglement, I have shown how Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams both offer modes of writing character that rely on the specific resources of the short form. By deploying an aesthetics of the sentence that guides readerly perception and emotion, they offer a solution to the problem of character in fiction that challenges literary expectations for psychological realism. Therefore, I would argue that an attention to the sentence and its effects might add to previous work that has been done on Woolf and Williams's short stories. In making this argument using Woolf and Williams, I aimed to give critical space to two authors whose short fiction is consistently neglected by studies and surveys of the short story. The inevitable consequence this choice is that many of their individual peculiarities remain unconsidered due to the scope of this project. Studying either author in their own literary-historical context would produce a far more nuanced and extensive account of how this interest in the sentence and perception is functioning both across their own oeuvre and as a response to work being done by their contemporaries. Likewise, this study has avoided any gendered readings of Woolf and Williams in favour of a broader, more formal approach, but, considering their respective interests in female experience, it would be worth exploring the gendered dimensions of this perceptual, sentence-based approach.

While the differences between their work remain far more apparent than the similarities, this project has provided one avenue for further study by tracing their individual investment in the perceptual moment and stylistic innovation. I want to end with a brief consideration of Woolf's "Portraits," a collection of eight fragments that were part of an unfinished 1937 collaboration with her sister, Vanessa Bell, which I see as embodying a more Williams-esque style. These "neglected short fictions" have received very little critical consideration, perhaps

because they are so different from Woolf's early aesthetics (Humm 93). These 'portraits' are extremely short and highly elliptical. As Nena Skrbic writes, "the idea is to evoke a series of paintings in a gallery […] Sexual, funny, spontaneous, each sketch, like each work of art on a gallery wall, has its own dynamic, its own sense of space, energy, and life" (165). Skrbic traces this painterly strategy in "Portraits" by arguing that Woolf's "visual technique means that we can read on our own terms: our eyes shift towards the captions, or picture titles, above the individual sections and choose which one to concentrate on accordingly" (165). However, I am skeptical about the limits of this analogy to painting, which is so often used to interpret Woolf's work, in the case of "Portraits." Maggie Humm offers the analogy to photography as an alternative, arguing that Woolf "stages a number of gendered gazes shaped by a photographic syntax" (95). But I wish to adopt an approach to these texts that resists an appeal to another form of media.

In "Portraits," Woolf provides eight windows onto the lives of individuals and their social context. While some are told from the first-person perspective and others from the third, they all share an interest in every day life, thematized through the mention of food, clothing, culture, art, relationships, or gossip. Likewise, they are all brief scenes, typically spanning a fleeting perceptual moment, and describe reality in phenomenophilic terms. For instance, in "Waiting for Déjeuner," the narrator describes all the ephemeral sensory impressions that Monsieur and Madame Louvois fail to notice while waiting for their food to arrive, presumably because they are so distracted by hunger. Hidden among the many inconsequential perceptions is the description of a waiter who "spat on his hands then wiped the plate to save the trouble of rinsing it" (Woolf, *SF* 242). The relevance of this emerges in the last line, where this same waiter "slapped a plate of tripe" on the table for the two diners (242). The pun on tripe, which refers both to a culinary dish and nonsense or rubbish, provides the final deflationary line.

Many of Woolf's sentences in these stories are indistinguishable from Williams's: "…she was everlasting and entirely solved the problem of life" (243); "…she yet contrived to brush her hand over her fur as if to indicate the motherly sisterly wifely tenderness with which, even if there were only a cat in the room to stroke, she stroked it" (244); "I always say anyone can smash a plate; but what I admire is old china, riveted" (245). These lines are meticulously crafted, with each sound and syllable building off the one that comes before. As Lutz writes:

> The phrasing now feels literally all of a piece. The lonely space of the sentence feels colonized. There's a sumptuousness, a roundedness, a dimensionality to what has emerged. The sentence feels filled in from end to end; there are no vacant segments along its length, no pockets of unperforming or underperforming verbal matter. The words of the sentence have in fact formed a united community. (6)

This tactic, pioneered by Gordon Lish, is known as consecution, where the writer looks backwards rather than forwards in the act of writing. The result of consecution is a certain impenetrability, given that the writer foregoes any plan and allows language itself to guide story. The unpredictability and strangeness of language in "Portraits" suggests that Woolf has given in to the pressures of language in an attempt to get away from the problem of saying what one means. Woolf's fascination with the shapes and contours of language in these stories "frees [her] to characterize who and what she will as she pleases" (Sims 31). These polished, enigmatic sentences are combined in each portrait along lines that defy narrative logic, seemingly reveling in the phenomenophilic pleasure of language itself. The indulgence with language combined with the incongruity of perception are what allow Woolf to describe Madame Alphonse in "The Frenchwoman in the Train" as "snuffing like a tapir" with "her pendulous nid-nodding head" and her eyes that "make a wrinkled background with wry angular branches and peasants stooping" (Woolf, *SF* 242-243). Such description is absurd and resists any obvious interpretation of her character.

Humm's photographic reading leads her to suggest that "the focus here is less on the narrator and more on a blurring of subjective and objective" (98); however, I must disagree with her de-emphasis on the narrator in these stories. Skrbic offers a more apt reading when she wonders "whether the story only exists while the author is looking" (165). As I demonstrated in my last chapter, there is always an embodied, perceiving eye operating in the fiction of Woolf and Williams that reveals itself at the level of language. Both authors intertwine character, narrator, and language in such a way that they become inextricable. Their stories become a unified totality has no clear lines between these narrative elements. Sentences themselves become animate, lively places of interpretation, both obscuring and illuminating possible meanings. The character of sounds, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences are used as the building block for literary character. Language becomes its own character while it simultaneously characterizes. This method shows how language can sway both reader and author alike, such that a story often yields to the will of words rather than that of character, narrator, or author. Such unwieldiness means that even the author cannot ensure a single, authoritative meaning.

Woolf and Williams embrace rather than resist this instability, writing stories that are as fleeting and ephemeral as the moments they depict. Rather than force the phenomenophilic to take on the burden of fixed meaning, they allow it to remain elliptical, ambiguous, and open-ended. By limiting the perceptual horizon to the sentence, their stories are able to "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy" (Pater 149). Such vivacity is predicated on a willingness to indulge the whims of language and perception, both as a writer and reader of these stories. This aesthetics of the sentence allows for the defamiliarization of the quotidian at the most elemental levels of fiction. Both Woolf and Williams are exploring an alternative form

that not only "plays havoc with our notions of creating narrative" but also of reading character (Skrbic 165). Their stories trouble the usual assumptions and expectations we bring to fiction. They ask us to consider how language shapes our engagement with character; how the short form demands its own literary techniques; and how sentences function differently across literary forms. I do not intend for these remarks to provide final answers to these questions as much as to ask them in new ways. This project has directed attention to how perception and the sentence shape the experience of reading the short fiction of Virginia Woolf and Diane Williams, and I hope that others will bring this same attention to other short story writers in the future.

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