

“The little twist of sound could have the whole of her”: Silence, Repetition, and Musicality in Virginia

Woolf's *Between the Acts* and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*

by

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For my parents, whose love I treasure dearly, and for Joel and Sam, my favourites.

'O that my life could here have ending,' Isa murmured (taking care not to move her lips).
Readily would she endow this voice with all her treasure if so be tears could be ended.
The little twist of sound could have the whole of her. On the altar of the rain-soaked earth
she laid down her sacrifice. . .
-- Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* 108

Abstract

This thesis tracks an alternative trajectory for thinking about the way in which modernist texts incorporate silence as an aesthetic and a theme, one that departs from those currently favoured by contemporary modernist criticism. Particularly, I wish to move away from the prevailing approach to Virginia Woolf's texts that borders on biographical criticism, an approach that theorizes silence as indicative of the author's trauma, pointing to that which is 'unsayable' as evidence of some psychically unassimilable event. Instead, I argue that by experimenting with an aesthetics of silence, repetition, and musicality, Woolf is participating in a wider cultural debate. With *Between the Acts*, I believe she seeks to incorporate sound to such a degree that the novel becomes a listenable art piece, requiring a reconceptualization of reading as not only a visual act, but an aural one as well. Here, textual silence acts as rests in a musical score, opening a paradoxically empty aural space that works in concert with the 'notes' of the novel.

In order to support this argument, I bring historical context and contemporary work on modernism and music to bear on both *Between the Acts* and Gertrude Stein's opera *The Mother of Us All*. Stein, whose work is increasingly discussed within the critical arena of sound studies, presents us with a text that is at once a literary work *and* a musical score, asking the reader to contend with both syntactical and musical notation simultaneously. Through close readings of both texts alongside theories of sound and a genealogical history of sound technologies emerging in the early twentieth century, as well as the philosophical and political implications of silence and repetition, my thesis aims to present these works not as participating in an aesthetics of the traumatic void, but as uniquely hearable, revolutionary works of art.

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Chapter One

“Modernity's dis-ease”: Music and Philosophy in the Early Twentieth Century

Silence can be a plan
 rigorously executed
 the blueprint to a life
 It is a presence
 it has a history a form
 Do not confuse it
 with any kind of absence.

-- Adrienne Rich, “Cartographies of Silence” qtd. in Glenn 1

Sitting down to her desk one morning in her London home, Virginia Woolf wrote this in her diary: “Could I get my tomorrow morning's rhythm right?” (qtd. in Laurence 171). Here I sit in the midst of a blustery Winnipeg winter, wondering what a morning's right rhythm might sound like, wondering how to articulate what I believe to be Woolf's constant concern with the way her texts sound; how a sentence's percussive nature can be discussed without falling into any number of critical clichés having to do with music and literature. Septimus Smith believes that sounds make “harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds,” and perhaps it is with him that I should begin (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 22). Research on the interrelationship between silence and war trauma is what began my interest in the idea of how blank space means in a text; a conversation with a professor at a conference prompted my interest in moving away from the assumed link between silence and trauma in relation to Woolf's writing. The professor argued that because Septimus Smith fits so perfectly within the category of a shell shock victim, displaying so many signs of mental distress that we now understand to be symptomatic of many survivors of World War One, Woolf herself was using Smith as a conduit to express her own traumatic past. Certainly much scholarship supports this

reading, as critics and biographers agree that Woolf likely suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her brother, and had much trouble dealing with the very early death of her mother (see Henke and Eberly, 2007).

And then there is the suicide. More than any other female writer, perhaps (with the possible exception of Sylvia Plath), Woolf's decision to end her own life on March 28, 1941 continues to capture both popular and critical attention. However, while I truly believe that we would be remiss in ignoring the psychological reality of any artist when discussing their work, I remain unconvinced that biography should hold a privileged position within any textual analysis. Furthermore, it is not my aim with this thesis to debunk or prove incorrect theories having to do with the way in which Woolf's life may or may not be reflected in her fictional work. Instead, I'd like to offer a potentially more interesting and theoretically robust account of her novel *Between the Acts* that may not replace ones currently on offer, but that will hopefully provide an alternative or, at the very least, an additional way of thinking about this text. My argument is that Woolf's experimentations with silence have less to do with her childhood trauma and more to do with musical aesthetics and her participation in a wider cultural debate surrounding text and sound in the early part of the twentieth century.

It is important to note that I am not the first to make this connection between music and silence in this text or others. In her book "The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition," Patricia Ondek Laurence argues that *Between the Acts* displays a "structural intention [with its] narrative breaks and silence on the page," part of what Laurence contends is Woolf's consistent preoccupation, in all of her work, with

“proceeding through a lexicon and metaphors of silence [...] ellipses, dashes, and parentheses—a punctuation of suspension” (173). Through the use of “words as notes, silences as pauses,” Laurence suggests that Woolf is able to construct a text that sings, resulting in a novel that, in comparison to *The Waves*,

contains the anxious counterpoint of a modern musical composition. Each rhythm—the calm sweep of *The Waves* and the halting beats of *Between the Acts*—is determined by Woolf’s planning the novels to a rhythm or a musical form.

(170, 180-81)

I agree with Laurence that Woolf sought to incorporate sound to such a degree that the novel becomes a listenable art piece, requiring a reconceptualization of reading as not only a visual act, but an aural one as well. The question becomes, then, why is Woolf creating a tonal, heard quality to her work?

These semantically “empty” or blank spaces on the page signify, for many critics, not only a way out of linguistic constraint for Woolf, but also an artistic haven free from the demands of a patriarchal social order. In her essay “The Dotted Line,” Rachel Bowlby suggests that Woolf’s ellipses provide a site of resistance against an inherited language that consistently undervalues the female and relegates women to the periphery:

there is a resistance to women's writing which is built into the very structure of syntax [...] and into the structure of a society which will not take women as equals. What women write will be unfitting. The male sentence is not for women, and yet [Woolf] is condemned to using it, however ineptly. (139-40)

For Bowlby, Woolf’s constant interruption of the expected flow of language in her work

represents a writer rejecting the necessity of an explicitly masculinist, linear, and teleological narrative bestowed upon her, a “continual refusal to come to a conclusion, to complete the sentence”: a form of feminist, political action realized through art (145).

Although accounts like Bowlby's remain interesting to me not only for their political implications but also for their theoretical sophistication, this thesis seeks to re-conceptualize Woolf's “blank spaces” as participating in, rather than rejecting, a dominant cultural conversation. Woolf's experiments with music and sound in *Between the Acts* become interesting when examined alongside other modernist texts participating in similar aesthetic play, such as the famous “Sirens” chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the representation of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* or, even more intriguingly, that high modernist opera of undeniable aural appeal: Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*. I choose this last work not only because of its relative obscurity within modernist studies, but also because of what I find to be many points of intersection between Woolf's and Stein's texts.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses in her playfully titled essay “Woolfenstein,” affinities between these two writers may not seem readily apparent. Nonetheless, DuPlessis attempts to “make the monstrous intertext” between the two authors' works, a theoretical methodology in which “all bodies of work would be intercut, depending upon critical desire and need” (100). DuPlessis moves away from a “source studies” approach, which involves “a 'linear' and developmental (as well as cumulative and progressive) notion of authorship and its authority,” and opts instead for an “intertextual model” that “makes a new cut into the material, 'creating new dividing lines not between the two

oeuvres but within each of them” (100). Building on the work of Barbara Johnson, this strategy results in a comparatively more licenced approach to literary criticism. Here, the critic need not prove that Woolf read Stein (though she most certainly did, as DuPlessis points out), nor that s/he is indebted to parallel biographical realities of both authors. Instead, what becomes most important in this type of analysis are textual echoes within and between two works of art, whereby two texts are critically interwoven to create an intertext that reveals something new about each work.

Sarah Balkin picks up on these echoes in her essay “Regenerating Drama in Stein’s *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* and Woolf’s *Between the Acts*,” arguing that “music is a unifying, potentially threatening source for both Woolf and Stein” (448). Balkin believes that it is through the dramatic form that the authors' work finds kinship—in Stein's play that repeats itself with variations (like a musical score), and Woolf's pageant play framed by the novel that “regenerates itself, a human drama that keeps on going is a drama war cannot stop” (441). Balkin also points out that the tradition of the pageant play, which began around 1905, “incorporated its creators' enthusiasm for Wagnerian opera and German folk festivals,” connecting Woolf and Stein's creative trajectories through an interest in opera and musical aesthetics (443). The form of both *The Mother of Us All* and *Between the Acts* seems unstable and mercurial to me; Stein's opera can be also be read as a literary, although admittedly an unusual, text, and significant portions of Woolf's novel could certainly be performed on stage. That both choose to anchor this experimentation with medium in music makes the aural aspects of each text a potentially fruitful site of critical engagement.

Something interesting happens when one places Stein's text next to Woolf's—the idea of a traumatic narrative immediately seems inadequate alongside such a confident and joyful writer as Stein, who regularly declared herself a genius and believed firmly that she was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Her literary prowess and confidence permeates her work, evident by her choice to write her way into her own opera, taking her position as author and narrator so seriously that she would literally appear on stage as “Gertrude S.” This is a writer who wants to ensure that her reader knows exactly who she is, not someone whom we feel obliged to piece together through diaries, letters, and biographical hearsay. Given enough time, it is no doubt possible that combing through *any* writer's life would reveal unpleasant and potentially traumatic pasts; it is my contention that suturing that past to an artistic creation potentially constricts that creation to the point of overdetermining its meaning, and can risk silencing more interesting forms of critical engagement with a particular piece of literature.

Interestingly, trauma theorists have developed an approach to narrative that is often associated with the act of hearing, or listening, to textual gaps and blank spaces in a particular way. As Dori Laub contends in his essay “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” trauma, according to the prevailing model is, in narrative terms, non-existent because the traumatic event is so painful that it precludes the subject from ontologically experiencing it, making the event “a record that has yet to be made” (57). As a result, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his [sic] very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). This co-creationist model of psychoanalysis places the reader, or

'listener' of the traumatic event in the place of author, making the amelioration of the wound essentially an act of co-authorship. The analyst literally fills in blank spaces for the analysand, remaining careful to do so only when the patient is accepting of this new, or more complete epistemological narrative. My goal with this thesis is to resist this urge with Woolf's text, to avoid populating those blank spaces that are so crucial to her aesthetic, and to imagine what it would mean for blankness to signify not just a void or negative space, but a different type of textual semantics. My analysis depends upon aurality but rejects the model of silence as merely the absence of language; as indicative of a narrative gap that, for many psychoanalytic readers, signifies trauma.

Stein, whose work is increasingly discussed within the critical arena of sound studies, presents *The Mother of Us All* as a text that is at once a literary work and a musical score, asking the reader to contend with syntactical and musical notation simultaneously. Many critics have picked up on Stein's careful attention to sound and rhythm, evident even in the composition of her non-operatic texts. In his recent article "Now Not Now: Gertrude Stein Speaks," Brian Reed discusses how listening to Stein read her non-operatic work reveals rhythms and intonations that, when diagrammed, plot something akin to a musical score. Stein's "If I told him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," Reed argues, displays "an underlying rhythmic logic [...]. A musician might say that Stein states a theme, varies it, then returns to the opening theme" (110). Similarly, in "The Difference Sound Makes: Gertrude Stein and the Poetics of Intonation," Scott Pound contends that Stein's *The Making of Americans*, "a text that on the page cannot but seem preposterous to most readers—a 925-page 'novel' with no conventional plot or

characterization--[...] comes effortlessly to life as sound and song in performance” (25). Stein views the act of reading not only as a silent one involving the eye, but also as an active, potentially aural one, always enlisting the ear as well.

Shifting from the ocular to an aural perspective in this way allows the ellipses, gaps and silences in Woolf's *Between the Acts* to act as rests in a type of literary musical score. In her book *Reverberations: Sound and Structure in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Kathleen McClusky undertakes an extremely technical structuralist analysis of Woolf's syntactic rhythms and cadence, suggesting that Woolf's

intricate patterning of sound repetition [...] is not only characteristic of Woolf's prose, but also structurally constitutive. This means that the phonemic level can be seen to influence and participate in the construction of the text's larger levels as they come into being. (3)

This often elegant interaction between form and content, when analyzed in this way, reveals Woolf's prose to act at many times like traditional poetry, depending as much upon rhythm and accent as it does upon semantic reference.

Though McClusky does not devote a chapter to *Between the Acts*, she does use the novel's play with echo to illustrate the basic tenets of phonemic analysis she undertakes throughout the book:

The *inflow-echo* is familiar to us as a principle of English rhyme. In prose, of course, its position is less determined than in poetry, though in Woolf's novels, these rhymes are often found in terminal or other significant positions. [...] 'And the old man with the beard. They all appeared.' (BA, 185). The *solid-echo* [...]

repeats the whole syllable and includes puns as well as pure repetition: 'So abrupt.
And corrupt.... To disrupt?' (BA, 79). (11)

Revealing increasingly complex, often chiasmatic patterns within Woolf's prose, McClusky unpacks three of Woolf's novels as if each were a puzzle made of intricate, interlocking mechanisms to which one need only figure the key in order to 'solve'. My investigation, however, will focus less on uncovering something hidden within the aural folds of *Between the Acts*, and more on analysing how Woolf's novel fits into the larger social and ideological context of musical semantics.

In his book *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, Brad Bucknell positions musicality as one of modernism's chief aesthetic concerns. He sees high modernists as interested in and furthering the debate surrounding music in the late nineteenth century, exploring music's ostensibly non-referential quality through their literature. As he puts it,

These writers are devising and executing their own separate approaches to literature at a time when 'music' for many writers refers obliquely to an art which transcends referential or lexical meaning, and which has the power of some kind of excessive, yet essential, element to which the literary may point, but which it can never fully encompass. (1)

The paradox here is, of course, that modernists are using language in order to transcend language, catching their works within a constant loop of failed referentiality that gestures toward but never arrives at any identifiable semantic meaning. Bucknell argues that this tactic, manifested in a wildly diverse array of texts in the early part of the twentieth century, is a way for these artists both to participate in the exploration of music as one

important art form among many, and to express ideological unrest with their contemporary world. Music, conceptualized as an 'artificial' art form, promising only surface meaning and no accessible semantic depth, is the perfect vehicle to carry both modernist writers' disillusionment and fascination with the modern world's artificiality; music “is the articulation of modernity's dis-ease” (24).

It is this idea of artificiality that continuously fuels the debate surrounding musical aesthetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bucknell positions two key players on either side of this critical arena: French Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé and German composer Richard Wagner. Mallarmé was deeply concerned with the relationship between music and text throughout his career, constantly referencing music's ability to express that which is inexpressible, believing that the poet's task is to use sound in such a way as to make the text's silences heard. In his influential 1896 essay “Crisis in Poetry,” he writes that

Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships – all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which is the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way. (qtd. in Bucknell 18)

Here, music's ability to exist as art untethered to definite meaning is transposed onto the text, which, for Mallarmé, already expresses its own silence. He “joins music and literature not so much at the level of their transcendence, but at the level of their obscurity, in precisely the place where they do not speak” (Bucknell 31). In a complex interplay between silences, both music and literature fail to make meaning, and this, for

the poet, is not only inevitable, but is also the paradoxically inaccessible space within which true beauty resides: “I have been on the purest glaciers of Esthetics,” he writes, “because after I found Nothingness, I found Beauty. [...] Blanks unfailingly return; before they were gratuitous; now they are essential; and now at last it is clear that nothing lies beyond; now silence is genuine and just” (qtd. in Bucknell 32). Mallarmé finds, in music, literature's aphasia; interestingly, this is a space not of psychological despair or trauma, but of pure beauty.

For Wagner, on the other hand (who, importantly, approaches this subject from the position of composer, not poet), music fails to transcend language because it will always require it. Language anchors music in such a way that the note, in his view, becomes indebted to the word. His writing expresses

a tacit acknowledgement of music's limitations: though it seems to transcend the limits of language, it also appears to require language. The perfect art is not music freed from language, but rather, music bound to language. (Bucknell 27)

Wagner displays a need to articulate even that which cannot be articulated, rendering Mallarmé's focus on silence and blank spaces epistemologically insufficient. Wagner conceptualizes music as “unable to utter its unutterable speech without the presence of speech itself” (30). Here, language and music do not meet where they are silent, but rather language acts as a mediator, filling the blanks spaces that music cannot help but leave behind.

It is important, I think, to acknowledge that this conversation is just one incarnation of many making up philosophy's long interaction with both literature and

music. As Bucknell notes, music has, along with many of the arts, been regarded with both suspicion and admiration throughout the history of ideas. Plato thought of music as irrational and disorderly; Kant believed it held “the lowest place among the arts;” Hegel saw music as able to manifest an especially apt incarnation of a dialectical opposition, because “musical notes may be combined to create essential oppositions” through discord (21). All of this, leading up to and including the modernist period and its literary/musical experimentation, represents the philosophical and aesthetic conversation into which both Woolf and Stein are inserting themselves. To theorize their silence as necessarily linked to trauma is, it would now appear, unnecessarily reductive.

In her article “Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction,” Elicia Clements argues that *Between the Acts* can be read as an artistic creation indebted to Woolf’s ten-year relationship with composer Ethel Smyth, upon whom the character Miss La Trobe was apparently modelled:

In an excited exchange [with Smyth], Woolf exclaims, 'I want to talk and talk and talk—About music....Yes. I think you are a kind woman, besides being such a ...etc etc. Those two happy dodges of you come in useful on occasion, dot dot, dot —et cetera. I will write your character in that style one of these days' (Nicholson 1978, 4: 4145). Indeed, Woolf does compose a portrait of Smyth in *Between the Acts*, one that utilizes ellipses as a significant linguistic strategy. (57)

Clements's study is interesting to me for two reasons: first, she connects Woolf's ellipses with a distinctly musical sensibility, supporting my argument that there is something rhythmic contained in the silences of *Between the Acts*. Second, she describes Miss La

Trobe as a 'portrait' of Ethel Smyth, suggesting both an aural and visual quality to Woolf's modernist aesthetics. This link between the eye and the ear will be discussed further below, in relation to Stein's cubist portraits and her experimentations with sound.

One of the most influential advancements in sound during the modernist period, and something which undeniably influenced both Stein and Woolf's writing, was the invention of the gramophone. When Edison unveiled the machine in 1897, this debate surrounding music and referentiality was immediately forced to contend with a most unusual and unique new player. As Friedrich Kittler contends in his influential book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, "An invention that subverts both literature and music (because it reproduces the unimaginable real they are both based on) must have struck even its inventor as something unheard of" (22). The invention of the gramophone, as Kittler explains, marked the first time a human voice could be replicated, recorded and played back, decoupling sound from its originator; enacting Mallarmé's assertion that "for every sound, there is an echo" in a manner the poet had yet to anticipate (Bucknell 18). With this decoupling came intense social and philosophical anxiety about the mechanization of the human voice, something linked to music's relationship to the real but manifested in a newly apprehensive manner.

As Kittler points out, much writing about the gramophone in this period had overwhelmingly to do not with the potential of this new invention, but the dangers it potentially represented. The fear of disembodiment, a now literal Cartesian split of body from voice, drew concerned responses from many corners. Right from its very inception, too, the gramophone was intertwined with poetry, and with writing. Though Edison is

credited with building the first phonograph, the true inventor of the machine was a poet named Charles Cros. In 1895, in a prose poem dedicated to the phonograph, Alfred Jarry writes “O my head, my head, my head. All white underneath the silk sky: They have taken my head, my head—and put me into a tea tin!” (qtd. in Kittler 28). In his 1919 essay “Primal Sound,” Rainer Maria Rilke imagines what it would sound like to run a phonograph needle along the lines in a human skull. He postulates that

the coronal suture of the skull (this would first have to be investigated) has—let us assume—a certain similarity to the close wavy line which the needle of the phonograph engraves on the receiving, rotating cylinder of the apparatus. What if one changed the needle and directed it on its return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound but existed of itself naturally—well, to put it plainly, along the coronal suture, for example. What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music... (qtd. in Kittler 41)

There is something vulnerable to the human form—to the head, it would seem, specifically—that the gramophone laid bare. It opened the possibility of human expression without the human, threatening notions of presence linked to audibility in such a way that completely reconfigured the way philosophy, science, and art conceptualized what sound was.

Kittler continues:

the wheel of media technology cannot be turned back to retrieve the soul, the imaginary of all Classic-Romantic poetry. [...] Record grooves dig the grave of the

author. [...] Upon replaying the old cylinder of 1897, it is a corpse that speaks. (83)

The gramophone's impact on literature was profound, not in the least because the machine increasingly appears in modernist texts written during this period. As Bonnie Kime Scott observes:

In the “Hades” episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the always inventive advertising man, Leopold Bloom, considers having the voices of the dead recorded for future generations on gramophone records. A gramophone is played near the middle of T.S. Eliot's “The Waste Land,” [...] and a gramophone is the first thing “Captain” Jack Boyle wants to purchase with his unexpected wealth in Sean O'Casey's 1924 drama, *Juno and the Paycock*. (98)

Additionally, and as many critics have noted, Woolf uses the figure of the gramophone as a consistent trope in *Between the Acts*. Miss La Trobe's machine runs throughout the text, chuffing and ticking, repeatedly interrupting dialogue and demanding, unapologetically, attention from both the characters and the reader. More than that, however, the gramophone represented for early twentieth century authors the potential for art decoupled from its creator, something I believe Woolf was interested in playing with, since the novel's gramophone is consistently hidden in the bushes in the text. This leaves the pageant's audience wondering, but never quite discovering, from where the music they are hearing is coming. The machine is consistently linked to an absent referent; though its music can be heard clearly along with evidence of its mechanicity (chuffing and ticking), the audience fails to *see* the gramophone, and therefore it is linked to an anxiety concerning the inability to locate the source, or origin, of a particular sound.

In his essay “Death by Gramophone,” Sebastian Knowles theorizes the anxiety of origins surrounding the gramophone as linked to an uneasiness about death. “Modernism,” he writes, “embraces the audience, the speaker, the human connection. Far from creating the ‘Shock of the New,’ as Robert Hughes famously puts it, modernists were shocked by the new, afraid of this new technology, distrustful of its disembodied voice and its claims to immortality” (2). While he argues that because Miss La Trobe's gramophone “shiver[s] into splinters the old vision; smash[es] to atoms what was whole,” Woolf associated the new invention with disconnection and violence, I remain unconvinced that this splintering is presented as a purely negative thing in the novel (10). Woolf, as one of modernism's most emblematic members, sought to break with the ‘old’ Victorian model of literature not only because of its staleness but also because it was inept at describing the cacophony of the modern world. Miss La Trobe's machine jumbles familiar tunes and asks the ear to come to terms with unfamiliarity and discord, representing perhaps a threatening confrontation with newness but a confrontation that must, nonetheless, inevitably take place.

As Gillian Beer writes in her introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, when the gramophone ‘dies’ in Woolf's text, it sputters a final “*Unity-Dispersity*. It gurgled ‘*Un..dis*’ and ceased,” [...] “causing elements of dispersed words [to] skein together to produce a word of a different sense: *undeceased*” (Woolf 119, Beer xv). This is not death, but its opposite: life. The novel ends not with the curtain closing on the scene, signifying a stopping point, but with possibility—with the sound of human voices extending even past the novel's last sentence: “The curtain rose. They spoke” (130). While the tension

between unity and dispersity, between connection and disconnection is never resolved within the pages of *Between the Acts*, it is that tension that animates and gives life to the novel, and represents, for Woolf, the imperative of confronting a modern world filled with a confusing, and sometimes beautiful jumble of noises and sounds.

In her essay “The Phonograph and the Modernist Novel,” Angela Frattarola connects both Woolf and Stein through the figure of the phonograph, arguing that the invention actually grafted itself onto the aesthetic characteristics of, among other iconic modernist works, *Between the Acts* and Stein's *The Making of Americans*. The jagged, broken sounds alluded to in the former text are not only gestured toward, but are actually constitutive of the text: “fusing form and content, Woolf makes her poetic prose take on the rhythm and beat of the jagged music” (149). For Frattarola, it is Stein's love of repetition that drew her to the mechanical and aesthetic properties of phonograph records. *The Making of Americans*, Frattarola argues,

is like a skipping record, always beginning again as the narrator insists 'Now I will tell you this' [...] the dominant mode of understanding repetition is through listening, [and] Stein's narrative is filled with sound metaphors and pleas for the reader to be aurally aware. (151)

Both authors' fascination and affinity for the phonograph and gramophone can be supported by biographical facts as well, since Woolf writes in her diary of enjoying listening to her husband's extensive record collection (see Scott 2000) and, as Frattarola notes, Stein fell in love with “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine” while visiting a friend who played it on their gramophone. These facts are less interesting to me than the aesthetic

qualities of the literature, however, since likely most people living in Europe during this time period delighted in listening to the gramophone and found their own affinities for its newness as an invention and an activity of leisure.

Importantly, however, and despite her obvious attraction to the heard quality of literature (not the least because she wrote two texts in operatic form), Stein insisted that as a writer she was more interested in the eye than the ear:

Music she [Stein, writing in the third person] cared for only in her adolescence. She finds it difficult to listen to it, it does not hold her attention. All of which of course may seem strange because it has been so often said that the appeal of her work is to the ear and to the subconscious. Actually it is her eyes and mind that are active and important and concerned in choosing. I write with my eyes, not with my ears or mouth [...] A writer should write with his eyes, and a painter paint with his ears. (qtd. in Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent* 315)

Despite the seemingly odd reversal of senses Stein proposes here in relation to aural and visual art, this passage displays Stein's intractable stance toward an ear/eye binary (after all, how does one hear a painting?) in which one must operate independent of the other. Of *Tender Buttons* she writes, "It was my first conscious struggle with the problem of correlating sight, sound, and sense, and eliminating rhythm" (317).

Daniel Albright argues that despite Stein's focus on the visual, which is usually discussed in relation to cubist painting and sculpture, "her techniques have irresistible analogues with the musical," noting specifically her attempt to write without a linguistic dependence on nouns. Albright continues:

'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,' [...]: her most famous line, engraved in a ring on her stationary. This line simultaneously shows the sullen obstinacy of a noun—a noun, once it has performed its little trick of denotation, has exhausted its repertoire of artistic possibility—and shows how repetition can designify the noun, un-noun the noun, render it innocuous, demote it to a pattern-unit, like the AAAAAAA music-construct that Antheil compared to a single giant foot. (321)

Stein not only attempted to bridge the gap between the visual and literary arts, as evident with her literary 'portraits' of Picasso and Cezanne, but also attempted to undo the artistic separation between music and words in such a way that rendered both mediums utterly unrecognizable. This is truly, I believe, what makes her an especially fascinating choice of writer to study in relation to Woolf's aural and musical experimentation.

What most interests me, however, is the way in which silence, or sound's absence, functions in Woolf's novel and Stein's opera. As Albright explains in his book *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, the idea of the interval, or *betweenness*, was a chief interest of artists at the turn of the twentieth century. In a section about Arnold Schoenberg, one of music's most prolific theoreticians and composers during this time period, Albright writes that the

exploration of the gaps between the notes of the diatonic scale is strongly related to the Expressionist desire to investigate subtler, more powerful emotions than those expressible by diatonic means—musical dissonance is an attractive metaphor for emotional dissonance. (8)

Albright goes on to link this preoccupation with the interval to Freud's then-burgeoning

concept of the unconscious. However, as he notes later in this section, the splitting of fine hairs between sounds was nothing new to musical experimentation, which had begun centuries earlier and was being re-envisioned and carried forward by modernist composers:

Nicola Vicentino, born in 1511, experimented with microtones by devising an *archicembalo*, a harpsichord with split black keys, capable of making fine differentiations between, say, F sharp and G flat. In the twentieth century Ives wrote music for quarter-tone piano, and Alois Hába and Harry Partch built whole orchestras to play music written in intervals much smaller than the semitones that represent the limit of subtlety in the well-tempered scale; but these exotic instruments were, in a sense, only refinements and extensions of the old *archicembalo*. (9)

What happens when one follows this process of distillation and considers the gaps *between* the notes that exist between the established scale? How might silence signify differently in this new artistic milieu where music, literature, and the visual arts were all shifting radically and artists were challenging one another to push the limits of even the most avant-garde creations? Just as the combinations and speeds of notes were being consistently re-arranged on the pages of musical scores, so too, it follows, were the rests. And, if we are to seriously contend with modernism's insistence upon the interconnectedness between music and text, the way in which ellipses, dashes, and textual intervals function was also changing rapidly with each new incarnation of the word.

In his essay "The Double Session," Jacques Derrida tackles the subject of

simultaneously investigating two distinct pieces of art. Interestingly, one of his examples is a poem by Mallarmé. Bucknell notes that Derrida employs the structure of a fan to describe the way in which every text contains a fold of silence for every one of its tangible elements:

As Derrida says, borrowing an image from Mallarmé himself, the process of Mallarmé's texts is "the very movement and structure of the fan-as-text, the deployment and retraction of all its valences; the spacing...*between* all these meaning-effects, with writing setting them up in relations of difference and resemblance." The sense of "space" I am pointing to which most closely resembles Mallarmé's musical-poetics of silence has at least some figurative affinity with a kind of mobile "architectural" sensibility. (33, *emph.* Derrida's)

Here, textual silence acts as one aesthetic element upholding the structural integrity of the textual architecture; without it, the whole crumbles. Conceived of in this way, a musical score, too, contains a type of spatial logic that is perhaps more easily identifiable than on the page of most commonly discussed literary texts. The horizontal and vertical lines denoting bars of music are grid-like, and they are interspersed with notes and rests that each bare a different load within each measure (half, quarter, whole notes and rests, for example).

As Rosalind E. Krauss discusses in her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, the figure of the grid is one of the most crucial and ubiquitous tropes of modernism's artistic contributions in the early part of the twentieth century:

Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. As such, the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech. (9)

Paradoxically, however, modernist writers embraced this hostility toward narrative within the very narratives they were constructing. Discourse opened to the possibility of non-discursivity, of silence, in such a way that the grid, with its numerous spaces of non-signification or emptiness, came to represent for literary artists a way to explore the blank spaces that had always, perhaps, existed between the words. Krauss refers to this new, gridded art as “plastic,” because of its ability to be moulded or shaped in such a variety of different ways. Its blank spaces, though empty, hold limitless possibilities for interpretation, making the grid at once conceptually inaccessible for those seeking semantic certainty, and infinitely open to analysis. And so, Stein writes cubist portraits of cubist painters, and Woolf, with *Mrs. Dalloway*, re-maps London's urban grid according to the non-linear pattern of multiple characters' stream-of-consciousness interiorities.

Building on Krauss's work, Gabrielle Dean argues that Stein's relationship to the modernist grid is most evident in her love of diagramming sentences, plotting syntax visually and architecturally on the page. In her essay “Grid Games: Gertrude Stein's Diagrams and Detectives,” Dean examines the way in which Stein exploits the figure of

the grid in such a way that undermines its common associations with the predetermined placement of objects and concepts into predictable locations:

Diagramming [...] captures Stein's analysis of living experience, which associates concrete objects and their fundamental lack of knowability. In order to resist the shell game of mimesis—the pretense that something is not missing—Stein uses words to turn experience into things that are simultaneously present and absent—aiming to make both presence and absence perceptible. (318)

Stein must have been even more delighted, certainly, at the prospect of placing sentences on the same page as notes and rests plotted within a musical score, resulting in a complex interplay between structural elements that would appear on any one page of her opera.

Dean disagrees with Krauss that the grid resists language, believing instead that that grid is in fact *attached* to language through print culture's dependence upon lines, spacing, and visuality:

The grid [...] fundamentally affects the spatial experience of the page, by facilitating a revisionary and fluctuating understanding of positive and negative space. [...] The line may be visible, as in the black ink of the line of printed letters, or it may be 'invisible,' a visible blankness awaiting completion [...]. The quadrangle element of the grid created by lines may be an empty space, a framed absence, or it may be a solid block. [It] therefore puts into play a constantly changing and contingent relationship between what is there and what is not there, requiring a visuality that must be aware of the potential legibility of both positive and negative lines and spaces. (322)

It is this simultaneous grappling with both positive and negative space on the page that I would like to highlight here; in relation to Woolf's text which is littered with ellipses and dashes, *Between the Acts* contains its own modernist grid, perhaps, that asks to be read with the same sensitivity to presence and absence as Stein's most difficult and challenging experiments with grammar.

The simultaneous transparency and opaqueness of the structure of the grid definitely had an impact on Stein's aesthetic choices. As Judith Brown notes in her book *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form*, Stein was able with the operatic form to blend visual, literary, and musical techniques into one artistic expression. Stein's choice of set designer Florine Stettheimer for her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for example, marked a significant point of departure for modernist art:

As the curtains opened on the avant-garde opera event of 1934, [...] the audience faced a vast sign of the production's cutting-edge modernity: fifteen hundred square feet of sky-blue cellophane was draped from the sides and ceiling of the stage, creating a semitransparent cyclorama, glittering under bright white lights. The stark artificiality of the stage design proclaimed its relationship to the modern world and its unsurpassed hold on the new. [...] Plastic, that most twentieth-century of materials, here transformed the stage into a powerful blend of art, glamour, and the latest technology. (145)

This new aesthetic was interested in blurring the line between authenticity and the reproducibility of art, suggested by the decision to use plastic as a material, which is fragile and unapologetically synthetic. Stein's "semitransparent cyclorama" asked the

audience to consider the tension inherent in cellophane's aesthetic—we can at once see through it yet it also contains its own lines and patterns that can be re-moulded and shaped at a moment's notice. Through a representation of a material that is, in some way, at once present and absent from sight, Stein pushes the limits of what an empty or blank space could potentially signify besides a lack, or nothingness.

In his book *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*, Dylan Trigg links modern art's preoccupation with absence directly to its experimentation with silence, suggesting that, especially in the field of architecture, artists in the twentieth century seek to interrogate the boundaries between something and nothing:

As with *The Nothing*, if isolated from its preceding backdrop, silence is unrecognizable. [...] To speak about nothing is to evince a celebrated logical paradox. It appears to employ a counterfeit use of 'nothing' which has the consequence of rendering something ineffable seemingly effable. (xv, 3)

The task before those who wish to represent silence is indeed daunting, since they are, in effect, dealing with that which is, by its very definition, unrepresentable. Both Woolf and Stein's texts tackle silence not only as a theme but as an *aesthetic*, and this is a truly experimental and, I think, courageous artistic gesture. Writers who employ silence as a theme only, who construct their text around an already-established sense of what silence might mean, refer their text outwards in a mimetic fashion toward an ostensibly accessible realism of the lack of voice or sound. Stein and Woolf, on the other hand, contain this type of referential gesture within texts that consistently trouble and play with

what the referent for the word “silence” might signify, acknowledging the logical paradox Trigg identifies and using it to their creative advantage.

Though he wrote and composed long after the publication of either work under discussion, John Cage remains one of the most intriguing thinkers on the subject of silence. He, perhaps, has come closest to truly representing silence with his infamous four minute and thirty-three second performance of an absolutely silent stage. Trigg argues that Cage failed to reach silence, and that what the audience heard in the absence of a performance was their own shifting and rustling, an anticipation of sound, what he calls “pre-music” (13). “4'33',” Trigg writes, “is rendered a cell of sound that awaits the presence of silence. For silence to be rendered visible, it must rely upon a dynamic stasis between violence and the deserted space that violence leaves” (13). I find this account unsatisfactory for two reasons: the first is that Trigg falls back on an ocular-centric language to describe what the successful representation of sound might 'look' like, which seems to me to skirt the difficulty inherent in talking about silence. While the connection between the eye and the ear is certainly relevant when discussing Cage's performance, *merely* rendering silence visible would, I imagine, erase its (paradoxically absent) aural dimension. Second, Trigg's maintenance throughout his book of the inextricability between absence and violence sounds very akin to a trauma theory account. Does silence necessarily follow from a traumatic or violent rupture? Perhaps. Assuming the reverse, however, and postulating that every representation, every instance of silence can necessarily be traced back to a violent origin with absolute certainty seems unnecessarily deterministic. What might happen if we resist, for a moment, the temptation to

psychoanalyze these texts' blank spaces, and move away from, as Trigg puts it, “the absence violence leaves, which aligns with the structure of mourning” (19)?

I should note, too, the critical tendency to discuss the theme of repetition, which is related to both Stein and Woolf's experimentation with musical aesthetics, within a psychoanalytic framework. Freud's theory linking the compulsion to repeat with repression is something to which not only Trigg but many other scholars return in their discussion of Stein's oft-quoted “love of repeating.” Kittler writes at length about the emergence of Freud's theories of the uncanny alongside the gramophone which, as mentioned above, caused anxieties about disembodiment and automaticity. Krauss notes that once modernist art is cast in a neurotic light, “we are specifically enjoined from thinking in terms of 'development' and instead we think of 'repetition'” (22). Certainly, too, the commonly accepted traumatic narrative resists the development toward healing and instead takes the form of what Dominick LaCapra calls a “melancholic feedback loop,” which is not difficult to link either to the modernist interest in the gramophone or Stein's cyclical aesthetics of repetition (21).

In the chapter that follows I attempt to move away from this narrative of trauma into a close reading of *Between the Acts*, analysing specific instances of Woolf's experimentation with sound. Having broadly established the larger cultural context in which this novel is operating, the question becomes: in what ways do Woolf's aestheticization of silence in this text respond to and potentially shift the artistic conversation in which she was working? How do thematic and formal representations of sound and absence work together in *Between the Acts*? There is an air of incompleteness

or partiality surrounding this text. When Leonard Woolf published the novel, he assured its readers that though the manuscript was complete, were his wife to have given herself the time to revise, “she would not, I believe, have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs” (“Note” *Between the Acts*). Laurence points out that Leonard Woolf

directed to the printers [...] to 'Leave two white lines' with a downward arrow to separate scenes of the text. The intentional white spaces or silences and breaks in narration are, surprisingly, left out of both the American and English editions.
(173)

Woolf left this novel, in some important sense, incomplete, and filled with space.

Chapter Two

“The failure of the idea of last word”: *Between the Acts*

“That feeling slipped between the space that separates one word from another; like a blue flower between two stones.”

-- Virginia Woolf, *Pointz Hall* 5.

The first aspect of *Between the Acts* that I would like to address concerns the many ways Woolf experiments with silence thematically. Immediately, the paradox mentioned above manifests here: though the word “silence” denotes an absence of sound, something ineffable and inaudible, it remains a constant presence that threads throughout the fabric of the text. This is evident to such an extent that an entire reading could easily be anchored on this single word; one might even go so far as to describe its insistent textual return as “loud.”

From the very outset of the novel, Woolf paints a scene of audibility. *Between the Acts* ends and begins with voices; speech, creeping in from the corners of a text as conversations we are asked to overhear. The novel opens with “It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool” and ends with “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (5, 130). This not only creates a cyclical narrative—one potentially continuous strain of human voices—but also connects the idea of sound with space. We are asked to hear these voices in particular spatial contexts (a large room inside Pointz Hall, a theatrical stage) and consider them not as isolated sounds but as ones that naturally reverberate against walls, an audience, and inevitably, us as readers.

Writing of his experience compiling Virginia Woolf's earlier and later typescripts

of *Between the Acts*, Mitchell A. Leaska concludes that “it was as though she had whispered into some huge anonymous ear,” concerned always with her audience and her works' reception—the way it reverberated back at her from the crowd (8). Indeed, William and Isa, gazing at Lucy Swithin, think

She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination – one-making.

Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant, producing

harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. [...] we reach

the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 104)

Not only does this suggestion of circularity recall the insistent return of Miss LaTrobe's gramophone, which chuffs and ticks in the background of this scene, but also there is a sense in this passage of the characters and the soundscape of the novel's world reaching toward harmony and interconnection: “one-making.” Interestingly, however, this harmony is reached only through discordancy, sounds that feel out of place—jagged and broken when heard against the background of the predominant theme. This is the tension between unity and dispersity upon which this text hangs—it consistently oscillates between the two, resulting in a community of characters that seems at once disparate, at once incredibly whole.

It is in the interval between such polarities as unity and dispersity, collectivity and disconnection, that *Between the Acts* rests. In musical theory, an interval is a measurement of difference of pitch “between two musical sounds or notes, either successive (in melody) or simultaneous (in harmony)” (OED). Syntactically, melody versus harmony can be compared with parataxis and hypotaxis, two grammatical constructions Woolf

wields with great skill. Parataxis is “the placing of clauses or phrases one after another, without words to indicate coordination or subordination,” like notes being successively played on a piano. Hypotaxis is “the subordination of one clause to another” through conjunctions such as “and” or “but” (OED). Though the act of reading is ostensibly linear, preventing the human brain from processing two words on a page at the exact same time, the subordination of one clause to another in the case of a hypotactic sentence construction can mimic two notes being played simultaneously, even if they enter into the score, or sentence, successively. This has a cumulative effect; a clause is introduced and *maintains* its semantic hold on the sentence even as the subordinate clause is introduced, as in the case of the first sentence of the third paragraph of the novel: “Then there was silence; *and* a cow coughed; *and* that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses” (5 *emph. added*). Here, it is silence that remains the dominant noun despite the fact that the sound of a cow and a human voice are laid atop the original “note.”

Parataxis, on the other hand, has a melodic, rather than harmonic effect. Here words and clauses are linked only with commas or semi-colons, which work like rests, resulting in a choppy rhythm where the first note no longer holds throughout the entire bar, but must give way to the second, and so on. The most expressive instance of silence in the novel displays a paratactic construction; we can imagine that the first three notes are the same (and the next three as well), but there is a beat of silence between each: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding

the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence (24).” Here, it is repetition and rhyme that bridge the gaps between the words, such as “empty, empty” or “still, distilled,” resulting in a passage that could, quite literally, be said to sing, especially since the word “melody” derives from the Greek word *melos*, or song.

These two types of intervals create yet another tension in the novel, *between two betweens*, oddly enough, and the text seems to endlessly move in this strange, unresolvable direction. The tension between parataxis and hypotaxis is always that of equality versus subordination or, conceived of slightly differently, horizontal versus vertical relationships, and Woolf continues to grammatically play with this theme in relation to sound. Sometimes, silence and sound are presented as mutually dependent and equally assertive, such as in the following passage: “In all this sound of welcome, protestation, apology and again welcome, there was an element of silence, supplied by Isabella, observing the unknown young man” (25). Here, Isabella's silent observations work in concert with, rather than in competition with, the cacophony of voices and obligatory social vocalizations. Sometimes, however, Woolf positions sounds in a hierarchical relationship with one another: “The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer'” (16). Though Isa is, in actuality, physically hearing nothing in this passage, her ability to conceptualize the shift in routine, the intrusion of the news of a violent crime upon the idyllic pastoral environment which she is accustomed to inhabiting in a fairly predictable way, is represented in the aural language of the ear. The intruding melody or theme, the newspaper quote that now runs *beneath* the predictable chimes is,

presumably, at an auditory and atmospheric disjunct with the rest of what Isa 'hears.'

By plotting these horizontal and vertical relationships between sounds, Woolf creates a soundscape that forms an auditory grid of semantically intersecting right angles and lines. Though this may seem an inappropriate figure to use in relation to sound (since, as mentioned in Chapter One, the grid is usually discussed in relation to visual art), it is interesting, with this in mind, to note how often the shape of a square comes up in *Between the Acts*. Miss La Trobe has a “very square jaw” (37). Lady H.H., during the pageant play, references “two hundred square miles of fertile territory bounding the River Amazon to the Nor–Nor-East” bequeathed to her by her brother Bob (80). Budge the publican emerges from the bushes wearing “a long black many-caped cloak; waterproof; shiny; of the substance of a statue in Parliament Square” (96). And finally, at the book's end, we reach “the great square of the open window [that] showed only sky” (129). Though subtle (often unnoticeable, even), squares continually re-appear in *Between the Acts*, cumulatively building a grid in the mind of the reader that works to visually echo the aural grid that Woolf creates through sound.

The “chimes” Lucy hears, her metaphor for the predictability of the annual talk about the pageant, also function as what Melba Cuddy-Keane might call a “keynote,” a dominant element of sound in a textual narrative against which secondary and tertiary sounds are played—the urban noise of street traffic and bustling city-dwellers in Woolf's *Kew Gardens*, for instance. In her article “Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative Through Auditory Perception,” Cuddy-Keane grapples with the paradoxes inherent in attempting to discuss the way a text sounds. “Narrative,” she writes,

“always faces the difficulty that as soon as sounds are put into words, we are left with the sound of the word, not the sound of the sound” (382). And so the “zoom” that severs Mr. Streatfield's sentence near the end of *Between the Acts*, for example, only sonorously mimics a plane insofar as the onomatopoeic properties of “zoom” actually match the sound a plane makes.

This would be a representational problem, however, only if Woolf were reaching for mimesis, which is not, I believe, her central aesthetic concern. Beyond the man to which it refers, Mr. Streatfield's name sounds like two separate phonemes: “street / field,” recalling, homonymically, the urban/rural dichotomy that quarrels here during the speech—the tension between the plane as a symbol for industrial modernity and the tradition of the pastoral pageant play. These two collapse, on the page, into the single syntactical unit of a proper noun, providing one example of the continuous coupling between aurality and spatiality throughout the novel.

The consistent chuffing and ticking of the gramophone acts as what Murray Schafer defines as a “soundmark,” “a prominent feature of the soundscape, possessing properties of uniqueness, symbolic power or other qualities which make it especially conspicuous or affectionately regarded” (qtd. in Cuddy-Keane 5). The word “soundscape,” of course, recalls a landscape, and sound studies has, in its attempt to move away from language that is ocular-centric, moved toward an increasingly spatial vocabulary to describe its terms and concepts. This is something Woolf perhaps intuited. When the gramophone's records are accidentally switched during the play, the audience momentarily feels a shared sense of dislocation, as if the lack of a familiar tune leaves

them utterly unsure of where, finally, they fit:

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed their fingers; and others uncrossed their legs. (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 112)

Notice here the use of the word “levels” as well as the reference to surface versus latent melody, suggesting again a distinct sense of verticality inherent in the notes and sounds the audience struggles to identify. Eventually, they 'solve' the auditory mystery, relax their fingers and uncross their legs, and settle.

In her discussion of the repeated chime of Big Ben in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Cuddy-Keane explains how the same sound repeated but heard by different characters in various locations maps, quite originally, the city of London through sound:

like another soundmark, the bells of a parish church, the audible zone of Big Ben defines a community. [...] The single sound source of Big Ben brings into temporal

harmony a multiplicity of listeners positioned in a variety of locations. (387)

Like the passage from *Between the Acts* quoted above in which the listeners, though on different “levels,” are “all enlisted,” the chimes here place each character, regardless of class or position, in a horizontal relationship of equality. Big Ben is heard by everyone at exactly the same time, even if its echo may reverberate slightly differently depending on the specific geographical context of each person.

This aesthetic technique works similarly in *Between the Acts*, not only with the most dominant soundmark in the novel, the gramophone, but also with many smaller, less overtly significant sounds that consistently reinforce a sense of community made up of disparate parts. Mrs. Sands' cooking, for example, becomes a familiar symphony of signification for each character within earshot of her domestic movements:

Then, returning to the kitchen, she made those quick movements at the oven, cinder raking, stoking, damping, which sent strange echoes through the house, so that in the library, the sitting-room, the dining-room, and the nursery, whatever they were doing, thinking, saying, they knew, they all knew, it was getting on for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. (22)

Why, however, would the meal matching a particular time of day not be readily apparent to each character here? Presumably, if it were morning, they would all correctly interpret Mrs. Sands' movements as breakfast-making. However Woolf de-particularizes this event and suggests that it repeats, much like Big Ben's chimes, predictably, three times daily: at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, thereby creating a pattern of cyclical movement in which each character knows their part, whether it be waiting, eating, or cooking.

Shortly after the above passage there is an asterisk meant to be a textual break, and the novel switches to a new melody as the reader encounters an especially conspicuous musical paragraph:

Across the hall a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice came wimpling and warbling: gruff – Bart's voice; quavering – Lucy's voice; middle-toned – Isa's voice. Their voices impetuously, impatiently, protestingly came across the hall saying: 'The train's late'; saying: 'Keep it hot!'; saying: 'We won't, no Candish, we won't wait.' (25)

Surely one could quite convincingly plot this passage directly onto a bar of music, giving Bart, Lucy, and Isa their vocal parts, their place on the page of a musical score.

Additionally, Woolf later recalls this scene through the repetition of the word “warble” in relation to the gramophone. In this next passage, however, it is not the entrance but the departure of characters that is played out: “The gramophone warbled Home, Sweet Home, and Budge, swaying slightly, descended from his box and followed the procession off the stage” (103).

It is through this process of repetition that the novel often takes on a distinctly musical quality. Interestingly, cognitive science has recently found that repetition can, in certain circumstances, completely erase the perceptual line between speaking and singing; between regular, everyday sounds and those possessing musical characteristics. In her 2008 paper “The Speech-to-Song Illusion,” psychologist Diana Deutsch presents the findings of experiments in which she observed an unusual effect when participants listened to the same spoken phrase many times over. This is, she explains, is

the first formal investigation of a striking illusion: A spoken phrase is made to be heard convincingly as sung rather than spoken, and this perceptual transformation occurs without altering the signal in any way, or adding any musical context, but simply by repeating the phrase several times over. The illusion is surprising, as it is generally assumed that whether we perceive a phrase as spoken or as sung depends on the physical characteristics of the sound.

Despite the fact that this phenomenon is incorrectly termed an “illusion” (evidence again of a bias toward the eye in our scientific and philosophical vocabulary), this discovery quite radically reverses the common assumption that musicality is determined by the transmitter, not the receiver, of sound.

In the introduction to his book *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, Garrett Stewart frames the idea of reading with one's ear as connected to precisely this conceptual reversal of sound's trajectory. “The question,” he writes,

is no longer the presence (or index) of voice in text but, instead, the presence *to* evocalization of any text when read. No longer a metonymy of voice as *origin*, the idea of an 'embodied' voice emerges as just the opposite: signalling the very *destination* of the text in the reading act, the medium of its silent voicing, sounding board. (3)

In this view, a text becomes a provocation to vocalize, or read aloud and manifest, through a symbiosis between reader and text, an aural landscape. According to Stewart, the text requires the reader, yet the act of reading paradoxically signals a sound that is at once elicited yet consistently denied:

silent reading processes a text as the continuous inhibition of the oral. Inwardly, reading voices only as a concerted veto of sound. Where we read to ourselves is thus the place, always, of a displacement, a disenfranchisement of voice, a silencing. (2)

This contention is interesting to me for two reasons: first, Stewart emphasizes the inextricability of sound from silence. Second, he conceives of the text's potential for sound as a spatial phenomenon, where silence is a not just a lack of sound, but also a space in which sound could potentially reside.

Of course the gramophone, as discussed in Chapter One, also confuses the ostensibly unidirectional aural pathway between the source and target of a particular sound. With the invention of the phonograph, a person could, for the first time, potentially occupy the position of both transmitter and receiver nearly simultaneously: if one were to record and then immediately play back one's own voice, for example. The gramophone's constant refrain of “dispersed are we” in *Between the Acts* is both heard and repeated by the audience, creating again, like the effect achieved by Mrs. LaTrobe remaining out of sight in the bushes, an inability to locate the source of a sound, or a linear trajectory upon which the sound can travel with some predictability. This jumble of aural origins, a constant shifting of the transmitter of the same sound, is evident when one follows the repeated refrain throughout a passage such as this one:

The music chanted: *Dispersed are we*. It moaned: *Dispersed are we*. It lamented: *Dispersed are we*, as they streamed, spotting the grass with colour, across the lawns, and down the paths: *Dispersed are we*.

Mrs. Manresa took up the strain. *Dispersed are we*. 'Freely, boldly, fearing no one' (she pushed a deck chair out of her way). 'Youths and maidens' (she glanced behind her; but Giles had his back turned). 'Follow, follow, follow me . . . Oh Mr. Parker, what a pleasure to see *you* here! I'm for tea!'

'Dispersed are we,' Isabella followed her, humming. 'All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry. Single, separate on the shingle. Broken is the three-fold ply . . . Now I follow' (she pushed her chair back . . . The man in grey was lost in the crowd by the ilex) 'that old strumpet' (she invoked Mrs. Manresa's tight, flowered figure in front of her) 'to have tea.'

Dodge remained behind. 'Shall I,' he murmured, 'go or stay? Slip out some other way? Or follow, follow, follow the dispersing company?'

Dispersed are we, the music wailed; *dispersed are we*. Giles remained like a stake in the tide of the flowing company.

'Follow?' He kicked his chair back. 'Whom? Where?' He stubbed his light tennis shoes on the wood. 'Nowhere. Anywhere.' Stark still he stood. (59-60, *emph. Woolf's*)

Ironically, here, the phrase "dispersed are we" actually binds these characters as they successively take up the tune. Additionally strange is the fact that the gramophone, despite being personified with words such as "chant" "lament" and "wail," is italicized yet receives no quotation marks, though it continues to carry the phrase throughout the passage.

This theme of overlapping interiorities is mirrored visually in the text as well. One

of the most striking images in the novel occurs between Giles and Miss LaTrobe. Giles, early in the text, encounters an oft-quoted gruesome scene between a snake and a toad:

The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round – a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the barn, with blood on his shoes.

(61)

Critics often cite this scene for its suggestion of Giles' intolerance of interstitiality; the utter 'betweenness' of the snake and toad's liminal predicament frustrates him, and his instinct is to kill both, quite violently. I would add that it is significant that each 'player' in this scene is unable to fulfill its prescribed role, swallowing and dying, and this also frustrates Giles—nature's predictable play is skipping, its needle caught in a horrifying groove.

More importantly, however, the stain of this act is transferred to Miss LaTrobe near the end of the novel, as she is spotted behind the bushes and feels her audience slipping away from her:

Miss La Trobe stood there with her eye on her script. 'After Vic.' she had written, 'try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc. She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong,' she muttered. 'Curse 'em!' She felt everything they felt. [...] If only she'd a back-cloth to hang between the trees – to

shut out cows, swallows, present time! But she had nothing. She had forbidden music. Grating her fingers in the bark, she damned the audience. Panic seized her. *Blood seemed to pour from her shoes.* This is death, death, death [...]. (107, *emph. added*)

Whether blood literally pours from Miss LaTrobe's shoes is irrelevant—the fact is that Woolf accordions the text here; she collapses the temporal distance between page 61 and 107 through the repetition of the same image of bloody shoes, cast slightly differently. Just as boundaries are disintegrating here—between audience and playwright, reality and fiction, the past and the present, snake and toad—causing Miss LaTrobe to feel anxious, roles between characters are shifted too, and we confront the textual possibility of *shared* interior realities. This is heightened by the echo caused by the repetition of the word “swallow,” here referring to a bird instead of an act of consumption. There is also a call-and-response quality to the original suggestion, in the first passage, of “birth the wrong way round,” and the refrain, in the second one, of “this is death, death, death.” The reader may ask: isn't Giles supposed to play the part of the one with bloody shoes? The novel responds, mischievously: are you certain?

Adding to this sense of interchangeability between interiorities (what Woolf, in this novel as well as *The Waves*, refers to as the “mist” between characters) is the way in which the boundaries between thought and speech also become fluid; at times, in fact, they are ostensibly nonexistent. This phenomenon occurs in the following exchange between Giles, Aunt Lucy, William Dodge, and Isa. Again, the bloody tennis shoes appear:

[Giles] looked from them at Aunt Lucy. From her to William Dodge. From him to Isa. She refused to meet his eyes. And he looked down at his blood-stained tennis shoes. He said (without words) 'I'm damnably unhappy.'

'So am I,' Dodge echoed.

'And I too,' Isa thought.

They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening.

'On, little donkey' Isa murmured, 'crossing the desert . . . bearing your burden . . .' She felt Dodge's eye upon her as her lips moved. Always some cold eye crawled over the surface like a winter blue-bottle! She flicked him off.

'What a time they take!' she exclaimed irritably.

'Another interval,' Dodge read out, looking at the programme.

'And after that, what?' asked Lucy.

'Present time. Ourselves,' he read.

'Let's hope to God that's the end,' said Giles gruffly. (105)

Here the line between interior thought and exterior expression is transgressed by the text, as characters are able to speak “without words” and “echo” a thought of another that has yet to be articulated. Furthermore, in all of this dialogue that weaves seamlessly in and out of individual consciousnesses, there is the maddening tick of the gramophone, suggesting an endless sense of repetition and rotation when progress and forward movement—something “happening”—is what is desired. They are caught in the interval of Miss LaTrobe's script—a betweenness, a pervading sense of anticipation in which

nothing, whatsoever, happens. They are waiting for the present moment, for themselves; are they, perhaps, waiting for the novel to clearly delineate where, finally, each character stands in relation to another? Just as James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus states “I am a servant of two masters [...] and a third, there is, who wants me for odd jobs,” so too are Woolf's characters here expressing their lack of control over the novel's plot, gesturing toward a desire for an end to their feeling of suspension (Joyce 24).

This suspension continues, and it is as if time stops, like “the watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 7). The gramophone keeps ticking, like a metronome keeping a rhythm with a horrifyingly precise predictability:

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees.

They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick went the machine. (106)

This interval is uncomfortable for everyone, even though it is planned. It is the static nature of the pause that leaves Woolf's characters feeling unattended to; forgotten.

Interestingly, however, this interval is not one of silence; it is filled with the noise of passing cars and swishing trees—proof that despite appearances, not all aspects of the novel's world stand still in this moment.

That there is always more to hear in the world is something that Woolf's musical contemporaries were also exploring. In his 1907 essay “Sketch of a New Esthetic Past,” Italian composer Ferruccio Bersoni argues that

keyboards have so thoroughly schooled our ears that we are no longer capable of hearing anything else—incapable of hearing except through this impure medium. Yet Nature created an *infinite gradation—infinite!* Who still knows it nowadays?...We are tyrannized by Major and Minor—by the bifurcated garment. (qtd. in Albright, *Modernism and Music* 146, emph. Bersoni's)

This “bifurcated garment” could potentially serve as a metaphor for any two polarities to which art is meant to unwaveringly adhere. That there are infinite gradations *between* such polarities, however; that one need only acknowledge that such a spectrum exists in order to hear it happening all around—this was a radical theoretical intuition that continued to take shape throughout the modern world.

Listening to Miss LaTrobe practising her scales (one can never be sure it is her, since here again she remains out of sight—this time in the greenhouse), Old Bartholomew expresses a similar frustration with the familiar monotony of predictable musical expression: “the tune with its feet always on the same spot, became sugared, insipid; bored a hole with its perpetual invocation to perpetual adoration. Had it—he was ignorant of musical terms—gone into the minor key” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 72)? Here the scales march an expected path toward nothing new. Like the skipping gramophone, repeating without the promise of progress or change, a sense of stasis creeps into the text through the audible world.

But what function does the suggestion of such musical monotony serve? In his discussion of Erik Satie, the French modernist composer who collaborated with Pablo Picasso to create the ballet *Parade*, Daniel Albright explains the way in which relegating

music to the periphery, or background of a scene can serve as an ideological statement.

“Satie's effrontery,” Albright explains,

was to challenge the role that music played in human life. Instead of a Wagnerian semantically dense, emotionally quickening music, a music that heightened the vivacity of the listener's responses to the world, Satie intended to produce music that receded into the background, an unobtrusive continuo to daily action. It is possible to speak of this as wallpaper music—Satie himself gave to one of his *musiques d'ameublement* the title *Tapisserie en fer forgé*—and the term is appropriate, in that the music provides a kind of sonorous grid on which the mind superimposes the patterns of its own ambulant musings; the ultrasimple harmonic motion and rhythm provide coordinate axes for the listener's tracing of private mental music. (*Untwisting the Serpent* 191)

This is an architecturally influenced conception of music as spatial object, able to shift to either the forefront or background of a particular moment, dictating just how much room a particular listener is given to supplement the scene with his/her private melodies. This suggests that in any interaction between artist and audience, there is a constant negotiation between passive reception and active creation.

If one imagines that there is sense of interior design to the scene quoted above, where music serves as but one element in a carefully arranged tableau, the scene shifts from one emphasizing endless repetition to one in which there is, perhaps, room for variation. Characters who are presumably hearing the same tune (which acts here, like Big Ben's chime, as a “keynote sound”), nevertheless transform the song into different

and individual sonorous incarnations. When the sound of “Miss La Trobe or whoever it was, practising her scales” first wafts in from the greenhouse, Isa and William hear “A.B.C., A.B.C., A.B.C. - someone was practising scales. C.A.T. C.A.T. C.A.T. . . . Then the separate letters made one word 'Cat.' Other words followed. It was a simple tune, like a nursery rhyme —” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 70). A few moments later, however, Lucy and Giles hear the same tune, slightly modified: “From the garden – the window was open – came the sound of someone practising scales. A.B.C. A.B.C. A.B.C. Then the separate letters formed one word. 'Dog.' Then a phrase. It was a simple tune, another voice speaking” (71). Much like the sky-writing in *Mrs. Dalloway* that everyone interprets differently, the scales here become audibly malleable, depending on who is hearing the tune. Also, strangely, there is a seamless shift from music to letters to words, suggesting some kind of reciprocal relationship between the notes of the scale and the words of the alphabet which, Woolf cleverly points out here, share identical signifiers. Miss LaTrobe's predictable scales are here repeated but slightly altered, creating a sliver of variation within the predetermined musical scheme.

Additionally, and keeping in mind Albright's idea of a “sonorous grid” as well as modernism's more general interest in the figure of the grid discussed in Chapter One, just before the first notes of the scale are heard, we are given the following passage in reference to Isa and William: “The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; *a criss-cross of lines making up no pattern*” (69-70, *emph. added*). This is, significantly, not the first time the figure of the grid shows up in *Between the Acts*. Miss LaTrobe, refusing to get mixed up in the

potentially sordid enmeshing of Mrs. Ball's past, “splashed into the fine mesh like a great stone into the lily pool. The criss-cross was shattered. Only the roots beneath water were of use to her” (41). Moments later swallows swing horizontally between the birch trees that are “regular enough to suggest columns in a church,” creating another gridded aesthetic. Later, too, Lucy reads a “criss-cross from an old friend at Scarborough” (41, 128). The grid signals not only intersecting trajectories but also, significantly, the maintenance of empty space.

Furthermore, when silence appears in the novel, it is often characterized in spatial terms. A painting of a lady in Pointz Hall is described as leading “the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty” (24). Later, when Giles is transfixed by the painting, we learn that “the picture looked at nobody. The picture drew them down the paths of silence” (29). In both instances, silence and emptiness are somehow end points, destinations, places to which all the characters are, at one point or another, drawn. There is again here, too, a sense of verticality presented in the suggestion that silence can either be risen up toward, or down into.

Patricia Ondek Laurence picks up on the interrelationship between verticality and the textual representation of silence when she writes that

in literary studies, the attention to silence signals the new preoccupation with metalinguistics: linguistic anomalies, indeterminacy of meaning, the limitations of interpretation, and questions of narration that lie *beneath or above* the written language (97, *emph. added*).

Within literary studies, Laurence suggests, silence is conceptualized as constituting a crucial part of the spatial topography of which a literary text is necessarily composed. That there is a beneath or an above *to* language is an intuition upon which trauma studies certainly, following Freud's mapping of repression, rests. The difference I suggest in reading Woolf's silences, however, is that it is possible to conceive of silence as a crucial piece of textual scaffolding rather than a void of unknowability that threatens to eventually dismantle the entire semantic structure of a particular narrative. Conceived of in this way, silence acts much more like a musical rest. Is it any wonder, also, that musical scales, like the ones played by Miss LaTrobe, are something upon which musicians are asked to move up or down? Within musical discourse, too, notes are often defined as either high or low, based on their relation to their adjacent counterparts.

In *Between the Acts*, ellipses are at times equivalent to rests, and are often accompanied by the suggestion of a stop, an interruption, or an impediment to a previously determined rhythm that sometimes serves to repeat or retrace what came before, as in the following case:

So she stopped and said, "How did we begin this talk?" She counted on her fingers. "The Pharaohs. Dentists. Fish . . . Oh yes, you were saying, Isa, you'd ordered fish; and you were afraid it wouldn't be fresh. And I said 'That's the problem. . .'" (21)

Here, Mrs. Swithin uses pauses, syntactically represented by ellipses, to count and mark the preceding discussion; to rewind it and play it again, this time omitting that which no longer interests her. In essence, Lucy is here re-composing what the reader has just read,

asking us to experience, now, her subjective version of something we have already narratively experienced—another instance of repetition with variation.

Another example of this re-writing or re-composing is when Miss LaTrobe, convinced that her play is predictable and ordinary (and, therefore, a failure), laments that

If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable – it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others. 'A failure,' she groaned, and stooped to put away the records. (124)

Immediately following this version of events, a flock of starlings attack the tree behind which Miss LaTrobe was hiding, and offer a melody of their own:

In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabing discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off! (124)

It is as if the birds, in one uproarious instant, reject Miss LaTrobe's silencing of the play.

As she packs up the gramophone and puts the records away in a spirit of defeat, the starlings destroy her privileged composer position of the author hidden behind the bushes and loudly, cacophonously *insist* on extending the life of the final scene.

And yet again, as though Woolf rewinds the scene and places the gramophone needle down to rest on the very same spot, we re-experience the play's end, but with slight

variations:

They all looked at the play; Isa, Giles and Mr. Oliver. Each of course saw something different. In another moment it would be beneath the horizon, gone to join the other plays. Mr. Oliver, holding out his cheroot, said: 'Too ambitious.'

And, lighting his cheroot, he added: 'Considering her means.'

It was drifting away to join the other clouds: becoming invisible. (126)

Here Mr. Oliver echoes Miss LaTrobe's anxieties almost exactly, and the play, for a second time, dissolves and fades away, leaving only traces behind, much like Big Ben's "leaden circles" that "dissolve[] in the air" in *Mrs. Dalloway* (47).

Moments later, reflecting yet again on the performance, Isa and Mrs. Swithin extend this cycle of repetition by suggesting that every year the same play is performed, with slight variations. The following passage aesthetically evokes the rhythm of a skipping gramophone, as the reader is erratically asked to shift back and forth temporally and conceptually:

'This year, last year, next year, never . . .' Isa murmured. Her hand burnt in the sun on the window sill. Mrs. Swithin took her knitting from the table.

'Did you feel,' she asked 'what he said: we act different parts but are the same?'

'Yes,' Isa answered. 'No,' she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted. The old boot appeared on the shingle.

(127)

To add to the skipping gramophone effect, this boot recalls not only the many other boots scattered throughout *Between the Acts*, but most strongly the point at which the play's

audience who, after hearing Miss LaTrobe from the bushes (the voice that is no-one's voice) see, "as waters withdrawing leave visible a tramp's old boot, a man in a clergyman's collar surreptitiously mounting a soapbox" (112). This is just another example of Woolf reshuffling her book as it is read, disrupting the narrative even as she creates it. Every new perspective on the same situation creates a different, discordant strain, and eventually the novel becomes one big chorus of subjectivities that are slightly flat or slightly sharp when compared with the melody of the larger narrative.

I believe, moreover, that Woolf extends her interest in circularity by incorporating it into the very structure of her text. Not only does the novel consistently loop back on itself and repeat the same scenes over again with slight variations, but the motif of the circle also recurs throughout the novel, re-appearing in slightly different incarnations. Mr. Oliver is described as entangled with a swan, with the "tangle of dirty duckweed" circling his snow-white breast (6). Mrs. Haines suddenly feels aware of "the emotion circling them, excluding her" (6). Bart Swithin describes his sister's erratic thoughts as

circled, as happens after seventy, by one recurring question. Hers was, should she live at Kensington or at Kew? But every year, when winter came, she did neither.

She took lodgings at Hastings. (17)

Both birds and butterflies are described as "circling" in the novel, and Miss LaTrobe, pacing between the birch trees, notices that "the leaning graceful trees with black bracelets circling the silver bark were distant about a ship's length" (39). On the carpet in the empty room in Pointz Hall there is "a white circle [that] marked the place where the slop pail had stood by the washstand," and when Bartholomew flicks on the lamp in the

reading room, he notices that “the circle of the readers, attached to white papers, was lit up” (128).

The figure of a ring is also repeatedly mentioned. Hearing Mr. Oliver quote Byron, Isa raises her head as “the words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream” (6). Mrs. Swithin sits in Pointz Hall drinking tea, with “a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast” (9). Mrs. Manresa is described as waving her hand, “upon which there was a glove, and under the glove it seemed rings,” and later we hear Isabella ask her “what are your rings for, and your nails, and that really adorable little straw hat?” (25, 26). In this last example, significantly, and despite the quotation marks we are provided, there is nothing, in fact, that is audible about the scene. Isabella actually addresses Mrs. Manresa “silently and thereby making silence add its unmistakable contribution to talk. Her hat, her rings, her finger nails red as roses, smooth as shells, were there for all to see” (26). As well, as Giles stumbles upon the snake caught with a toad in its mouth, he sees it “crouched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring” (61).

There is also the ring swapped by the characters Edgar and Eleanor during the pageant play, and we eventually return to Mrs. Manresa's rings in an especially poignant moment of expression that again, paradoxically, occurs without sound:

Nothing whatever appeared on the stage.

Darts of red and green light flashed from the rings on Mrs. Manresa's fingers. He looked from them at Aunt Lucy. From her to William Dodge. From him to Isa. She

refused to meet his eyes. And he looked down at his blood-stained tennis shoes.

He said (without words) “I’m damnably unhappy.”

“So am I,” Dodge echoed.

“And I too,” Isa thought. (104-105)

Added to the recurrence of round shapes and other circular trajectories in the novel, (for example Mrs. Manresa “sensuously, rhythmically,” stirs her coffee “round and round”) this pattern creates a consistent movement in the text of circling and returning (35). This is similar to *The Waves* which, as many scholars have noted, contains a distinct back and forth rhythm, lulling the reader with the cyclic movement of the tides.

Is it possible that both the abundance of ellipses and the recurrence of circularity in the novel are thematically connected? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “ellipsis” is grammatically defined as a diseased sentence, one that is ineffective because it is incomplete: “defective, lacking a word or words which must be supplied to complete the sense.” Here we might remember not only trauma studies’ tendency to diagnose textual silence, but also the way in which theorists such as Laurence suggest that Woolf’s silences leave space for the reader to fill in their own thoughts. The term, however, and more pertinent to my discussion, also refers to a circular orbit or form, as applied to the path of planets or a dial compass (and here we might think of Giles, who “would keep his orbit as long as she [Mrs. Manresa] weighted him to the earth”) (72). Jacques Derrida picks up on this affinity between circles and ellipses in his essay entitled “Ellipsis.” He argues that within a text there are always blank spaces: ellipses that act as barriers to semantic closure by invisibly and endlessly proliferating meaning. Through

repetition and return, the book solicits in the reader a desire for an end point (which is, within an elliptical structure, always also an origin) while simultaneously frustrating our search for it. He explains:

Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same centre, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. But within the ellipsis, by means of simple redoubling of the route, the solicitation of closure, and the jointing of the line, the book has let itself be thought as such. (373, emph. Derrida's)

I suggest Woolf's text performs a similar function, that her ellipses and circular returns ask us to read for the first time something we feel we have already read, and yet, when we compare it to the 'original,' the second or third repetition sounds slightly off key.

This creates a type of uncanny palimpsest; the reader actually goes through a process of *mis*recognition, as we repeatedly think we hear an exact echo but quickly realize it is, in fact, a new variation. Such is the case with Mrs. Swithin forgetting William's name three times. In the following examples, the ellipsis acts to link the three instances together for the reader, cumulatively creating, through repetition, a central marker: a textual gap that we can follow over the course of four pages. The first instance: "Here are the poets from whom we descend by way of the mind, Mr. . . ." she murmured. She had forgotten his name. Yet she had singled him out" (43). The second: "But we have other lives, I think, I hope," she murmured. 'We live in others, Mr. . . . We live in things.' She had forgotten his name. Twice she had said 'Mr.' and stopped" (44). And, finally: "Mrs. Swithin put her hands to her hair, for the breeze had ruffled it. 'Mr. . . .' she began.

'I'm William,' he interrupted" (46). In these examples the ellipsis repeats, yet it appears in slightly different syntactic locations; the first two come after a clause and a comma, at the end and then beginning of the phrase, respectively, and the last serves as the subject of a sentence that is textually never realized. The effect is something like a musical fugue; in Derridean terms, "the ring no longer has exactly the same centre, *the origin has played*" (373).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a fugue is "a polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects or themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and introduced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices." A fugue depends, therefore, on 1) the presence of multiple 'voices' or perspectives, and 2) a certain level of contrapuntal discord. The above example fits into the second criteria, but lacks the first. This requirement is fulfilled, however, when Isa takes up the strain, thereby contributing her voice to what, until now, has only been Lucy's part to play: "There's something for your buttonhole, Mr. . . ." she said, handing him a sprig of scented geranium. 'I'm William,' he said, taking the furry leaf and pressing it between thumb and finger. 'I'm Isa,' she answered" (69). Here, Isa adds her voice to the composition, creating another example of the way in which characters' consciousnesses are knit together through the shared vocalization of the same phrase. This relates to another meaning of the word "fugue," this time, a more psychologically menacing one:

A flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the

person's outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure.

(OED)

Though this definition is certainly coloured by its antiquated pathologization of “neurotics” and “hysterical” people, it is useful in that it connects the word to the modernist impulse to map psychological realities in such a way that takes into account the unpredictable roaming of the human mind, something of which *Between the Acts* is certainly concerned. Woolf here takes that impulse a step farther by layering and interweaving multiple characters' psyches to eventually create a type of psychological patchwork. Where this effect differs from her earlier work is in the very fact that the overlaps are aurally realized. While in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, the narrative effortlessly moves in and out of characters' inner thoughts and subjectivities, here the connections are made through words and phrases that are either heard or aurally anticipated through ellipsis, leaving the reader to actively desire narrative completion rather than passively follow the book's narrative ebb and flow.

This creates another form of contrapuntal narrative structure, wherein the plot moves forward through competing, or at the very least differently oriented, interpretive impulses. This phenomenon is something which Martin McQuillan discusses in “Aporias of Writing: Narrative and Subjectivity,” his introduction to *The Narrative Reader*. Following Henry Louis Gates, McQuillan suggests that *all* narrative, in fact, rests on the interplay between an ostensible narrative through line and its opposite:

The inability of a narrative to complete the totalising ambition of its teleologically determined form, and the necessity of narrative syntagmation to continue in a chain of exchange, leads to the constant production – within the differential network of narrative-marks – of a systematics of narrative and counternarrative. This contest between narrative-marks for the representation of the 'truth' of experience, and to present themselves as both a full appeal to and an adequate response of the Other within the chain of narrative statement and request which constitutes inter-subjective experience, is at once never resolvable and necessarily incomplete. (23)

Paradoxically, then, all narrative is, in some important sense, always rendered impuissant by its own form. When Woolf presents us with the same event or situation repeated yet slightly askew, she is, in this view, making visible (or audible, in many cases) those “counternarratives,” like the contrapuntal elements of a musical fugue, that always already threaten the larger structure of wholeness inevitably gestured toward by the very form of a book.

Indeed, there are many instances in *Between the Acts* where repetition *without* variation signals atrophy, or death. Early in the book, in the empty library of Pointz Hall,

The fire greyed, then glowed, and the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window; beat, beat, beat; repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane. (13)

Without humanity, without any characters to interpret or perceive the novel's world, the

room stands in paralysis and, unlike the empty, rapidly decaying house in *To The Lighthouse*, nature is stuck on repeat. Later, when Mrs. Manresa fails to get an answer to her exclamation of the beauty of the view from the house, a similar feeling emerges:

‘What a view!’ she exclaimed, pretending to dust the ashes of her cigarette, but in truth concealing her yawn. Then she sighed, pretending to express not her own drowsiness, but something connected with what she felt about views.

Nobody answered her. The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying.

‘Then,’ said Mrs. Swithin, in a low voice, as if the exact moment for speech had come, as if she had promised, and it was time to fulfil her promise, ‘come, come and I’ll show you the house.’ (42)

This expectation that another person, here Lucy, somehow join in the chorus in order to introduce some element of change into the repetition seems almost dialectic in its structural requirements.

Indeed, Mrs. Haines utters what we might even call a “Hegelian” remark when Isa fails to rise up out of her chair at the expected moment and prepare to leave Pointz Hall:

But Isa, though she should have risen at the same moment that Mrs. Haines rose, sat on. Mrs. Haines glared at her out of goose-like eyes, gobbling, ‘*Please, Mrs. Giles Oliver, do me the kindness to recognize my existence. . .*’ which she was forced to do, rising at last from her chair, in her faded dressing-gown, with the pigtails falling over each shoulder. (6-7, *emph. added*)

I suggest that despite the ease with which we might be prone to map a dialectical structure

onto Woolf's aesthetic experimentation with discordance and contrapuntal narrative form, along with that specific philosophical tradition comes an acceptance and naturalization of violence and mastery, which I do not believe is a central tenet of *Between the Acts*. If anything, as many have argued, Woolf attempts with her last novel a movement away from fascism and wilful ignorance—away from the impending war and resultant social oppression (see Beer 1992). Moreover, following this particular line of thought would, I believe, only lead us back to the by-now familiar idea of the novel as a traumatic narrative.

Moving from Woolf's text into Stein's more explicitly musical composition, then, in the next chapter, I would like to discuss why the musical form is a logical place to which to return. In "The Impromptu That Trod on a Loaf: or How Music Tells Stories," her contribution to *The Narrative Reader*, Susan McClary suggests that instrumental music, though it is absent of language, nevertheless depends on narrative structure for its coherence:

The tonality that undergirds this music relies on a number of important principles. First, it produces a teleological model of time organized in terms of beginning, middle, and end. These function, respectively, to introduce the particular issues (themes, affects, dilemmas, dichotomies) to be dealt with over the course of the piece; then to depart from home base and explore various potentialities latent within the opening materials; and finally to restore certainty in a denouement that secures (almost inevitably) the key of the opening, thus resolving the tensions that have kept the piece in motion. (168)

Despite the fact that the piece might begin and end in the same key, which is, according to McClary, what keeps a particular piece of music familiar enough to the listener to keep listening, it is in fact, she believes, those pieces that “fail[] or refuse[] to work as the contract guarantees” that are most revolutionary and important (170). Here we are given a model of counternarrative that is productive without the suggestion that something must be destroyed or overcome, as in the Hegelian framework.

Is it possible, too, that both *Between the Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* operate in this way? As noted earlier, the novel has a cyclical form, beginning and ending with audible speech—in the same “key” we might say, using McClary's terms. However, Woolf's refusal to offer what the characters say on the very last page of the novel may be a slight shift in key that frustrates rather than fulfills the desire for closure, the “conciliatory framework” that McClary believes allows for confrontation and negotiation within a relatively safe and predictable narrative environment. When the novel begins, we know that everyone is sitting around talking about the cesspool. At the very end, however, all we are given is “they spoke” (130). What they speak, how it is said, we do not know, and we are left listening for words that are never, in fact, narratively realized. It is ultimately in the silence of *Between the Acts* that Woolf performs a revolutionary act of incompleteness. It is in her refusal to close the book that she asks us to listen, again, to “the space that separates one word from another” (Woolf, *Pointz Hall* 5). In the next chapter I work closely with Stein's opera and explore the way in which it, too, as Hélène Cixous might phrase it, sets the stage “for the failure of the idea of the last word” (432).

Chapter Three

Silence's Ligatures: *The Mother of Us All*

Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is silence there is silence and every time that is languid there is that there then and not oftener, not always, not particular, tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the shine and the succor and the white and the same and the better and the red and the same and the centre and the yellow and the tender at the better, and altogether.

-- Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* 21

At once opera, poetry, and a piece of prose, *The Mother of Us All*, like many of Stein's texts, defies any critic seeking an easily categorizable literary work. Because the text is not as widely available nor as commonly read as *Between the Acts*, it is useful, I think, to provide a brief summary of the main plot points and trajectory of Stein's story. The protagonist is none other than the formidable Susan B. Anthony, early twentieth-century American suffragette who was instrumental in winning the vote for women. She is described in this play as “a noble and consecrated women” who can regularly be found lamenting the social and legal inequality of women in the the United States (Stein, *The Mother of Us All* 14). Men, she says in Act One, are “conservative, dull, monotonous, deceived, stupid unchanting and bullies” (29-30). This ardent anti-male rhetoric continues throughout the play as Anthony is forced to contend with the inevitable complexities of attempting to achieve gender equality through constitutional means. She also has a constant companion named Anne, who critics often suggest is the opera's incarnation of Stein's partner, Alice B. Toklas (see Hill 1999).

As Robert Marx explains in his analysis of the opera, Stein creates a historical patchwork of notable American historical figures in order to create what he calls a

“perfectly disjointed portrait of long-ago American life” (10). He continues:

Most of these figures had nothing whatsoever to do with Susan B. Anthony and lived during different times. But Stein threw them together as part of her “landscape”: Daniel Webster, the New England elder states-man and senator from Massachusetts (1827-41, 1845-50), delivers excerpts from his speeches and court cases; Andrew Johnson, the seventeenth president, argues with the abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens; Anthony Comstock, father of American censorship laws, wanders into view, as do John Quincy Adams (the sixth president) and stage star Lillian Russell (the last two, unlike the preceding personalities, could never have met, since Adams died in 1848 and Russell was born in 1861). Most humorous is the appearance of Ulysses S. Grant, who will not tolerate loud noises and who talks about his military successor of a century later, Dwight D. Eisenhower. (10)

The effect is a historically cacophonous play; so many influential figures makes for a consistently shifting dramatic focus, and as a result the whole thing has a somewhat unruly, farcical appeal.

There is, too, a constant shift between private and public domains and the behavioural differences expected in both. Susan B. is seen uproariously debating with Daniel Webster in Act One (who, interestingly, refers to her as “he” throughout, apparently out of, according to Stein, “parliamentary punctilio”) (16). In the opening of Act Two, however, the curtain rises on Susan B. dutifully doing housework (in an apron no less!). As well, racial and gender politics collide in Act One Scene Four when Susan B.

has a daydream that she is speaking to a black man who, despite the fact that he is now enfranchised partially because of her political work, refuses to help her in her cause for women's suffrage.

Act One Scene Three introduces the ideologically charged marriage between Joe the Loiterer and Indiana Elliot; a union that serves as a platform for the opera to introduce the debate over the patriarchal values enshrined within the institution of marriage. It continues to be discussed in a political light because of the question of whether Indiana should take Loiterer as her last name. Act two begins with this debate and continues as Susan B. learns that in order to silence her, the word “male” has been written into the constitution of the United States. This act, as Marx explains, has a real-world referent, which was the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 granting, as part of Reconstruction, “voting rights to all 'male inhabitants... twenty-one years of age and citizens of the United States’”(9).

In the epilogue, which takes place after a time lapse of a few years, all the characters are gathered around what is supposedly a statue of Susan B. about to be unveiled in the Halls of Congress. The ghost of Susan B. moves across the stage multiple times as the debate about women's suffrage wages on just as before. Libations flow liberally, and most everyone gets increasingly loud and inebriated. As the activity swells to a climax, Virgil T. unveils the statue only to reveal Susan B. standing there in a garnet velvet gown and black bonnet. As the prologue states, the play ends not with the triumphant sense that steps toward a just and more equitable world have begun, but with “Susan B. singing about her long life in semi-darkness to an empty stage” (Stein, *The*

Mother of Us All 18).

While this opera remains largely ignored by critical and scholarly circles, it still haunts the margins of canonical discourse because, I believe, of its sharp feminist political underpinnings. Clearly, this is a story exploring the possibilities of women being loud, about winning the vote and the right to a public voice, about fighting hard and fast despite the social and cultural pressures that work to constantly silence women and reinforce oppressive gender roles. These are all valid and important points, especially considering that Stein herself remains a symbol of daring gender ambiguity and sexual freedom in a time when first wave feminists often rested their political beliefs on biological deterministic arguments (such as in the case of many Christian temperance activists in the early twentieth century who believed in women's superior moral sensibilities, and that winning the vote would have an edifying social effect).

I would like to make it clear that while I do believe this opera is doing important political work, there remains the fact that Stein seems to recognize the potential perils of this type of feminism. She acknowledges, for instance, the interlocking oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism. This occurs when Susan B. talks with a black man as mentioned above, as well as later in the opera when she ponders what it means to be poor. These are ideological interplays that remained largely unacknowledged by privileged white women activists during this time period. As well, the play ends not on a triumphant note, but in a melancholy tone, despite the fact that Susan B. is successful in her political undertakings. All this to say that while there is of course a clear link established between female oppression and voicelessness in this text, I remain convinced Stein is doing

something more complicated with her use of silence. As I hope to show, her aesthetic experimentation is at bottom political, and ultimately, as I discuss in the conclusion, a feminist project. However, it is because of the move away from silence's assumed connection to trauma and repression and not merely the connection between women and voicelessness (a link made all too often by psychoanalytic critics quoted in Chapter One), that I believe this to be the case.

For the purpose of my investigation, I will be analyzing the material text, discussing primarily what comes to light as it is read (as opposed to performed on stage). The opera is equally hospitable to both a reading and a viewing/listening, not least because of the extensive, written introduction provided on the first few pages, before the music even begins. Here we learn that “The Mother of Us All is a pageant,” and a few sentences later the work is referred to as “the opera,” and already the text introduces a subtle, chameleon-like genre-shift (11-12). One might already notice that the play within *Between the Acts* is, of course, a pageant play, and this specific dramatic tradition is also being referenced here by Stein.

Sarah Balkin connects these two authors based on their use and experimentations with the dramatic form, suggesting that Woolf, with *Between the Acts*, and Stein, with her drama *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, re-play history in such a way that makes room for the possibility of regeneration and change, repetition with variation: “The dramatic scaffolding Stein lays down provides, in Woolf, a way of representing history without allowing the past to structure the present” (434). It is in the narrative structure of both works, in other words, that the inherited narratives of literary history, canonization, war

and violence can be re-imagined, and reconstructed anew. As Miss La Trobe says, “another play always lay behind the play,” and Stein and Woolf, Balkin argues, excavate their texts even as they are written, making any notion of origin, linearity, or teleology (historical or otherwise), impossible to uphold (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 40).

Not surprisingly, Balkin goes on to characterize this technique in musical terms. “Repetition with variation,” she writes,

is foundational to musical composition, and the text of Stein’s play does the work of the absent score. Marc Robinson discusses Stein’s notorious use of sound repetition, stating, “Stein prefers to call it ‘insistence’: A repetition changes nothing, she notes, but insistence keeps pushing at different parts of obdurate surfaces, each push having a changed emphasis and speed and direction.” (140-141)

In *The Mother of Us All*, of course, we are given both a musical score and a literary text, coupling every linguistic repetition with its musical counterpart, and vice versa, creating a aural *mise en abyme* that extends and opens possibilities for change.

The next portion of *The Mother of Us All* is titled “the action,” another text before the text, and contains a scene-by-scene summary, such as this one for Act One Scene One:

A room in the house of Susan B. Anthony. This scene shows the home life of Susan B. And her constant companion Anne. Susan B. and Anne are seated beside a table on which there is a lighted lamp. Anne is knitting. Susan B. is pasting press clippings in a scrapbook. Gertrude S. and Virgil T. stand downstage near the proscenium. Their role is that of narrators. (15)

Here, we are immediately given spatial coordinates in which to situate ourselves as viewers, but we are also offered a certain rhythm: Anne's knitting and Susan B.'s scrapbooking, movements that work in contrast to the stillness of Gertrude S. and Virgil T. Additionally, there are striking similarities in tone and syntactical rhythm between this opening and Woolf's:

It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool. The county council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't. (1)

There is a zoom-in effect to both of these openings; one can imagine a theatre's curtain rising on either scene, asking the audience to pay attention to *this* interaction in *this* room of *this* house.

Furthermore, as “the action” portion of Stein's book continues, the reader is led through a fairly detailed summary of each scene and act before the opera even begins, causing the actual opening of Act One to, in fact, be a repetition; here, already, the record needle has been placed back at the start. While Act One plays out much differently than its summary predecessor, it now references or *cites* what has come before it, creating a second layer of “dramatic scaffolding” upon which this opera is built (Balkin 434). Act Two becomes even more intricately constructed, as the summary of Scene One takes place in the “Drawing room in the house of Susan B. Anthony,” and Scene Two takes place in “The same place” (17). Here there is a revolution back to the start *before* we get to Act Two in the opera, proliferating an even more dramatic spiral effect than we saw in Act One. Stein is interested in creating a disorienting, circular reading experience right

from the outset of her work.

The entire opera, actually, can be read as a type of aural collage where, like *Between the Acts*, voices are layered on top and between one another, gestured toward early on by the creative acts of knitting and scrapbooking. When Act One begins (again), it looks, and sounds, something like this:

Susan B. Anthony: Yes I was,

Anne: You mean you are,

Gertrude S.: said Su-san.

Virgil T.: said Anne. (19)

Because this only roughly represents the way in which the voices are tiered, and to give my reader a better sense of the text in general, I have included a page of the opera's manuscript on the following page. Here we can see that four characters are responsible for uttering two sentences. It is, in fact, one sentiment said twice; Susan B.'s "yes I *was*" is merely shifted in tense and deictic location when Anne re-states it and says "you mean you *are*," a shift that is facilitated by the narrators, Gertrude and Virgil. Oddly, both reader and viewer/listener of the opera would, presumably, know which character is saying which line (as evident by the bolded parts in the score and by the ability to visually see which character is singing on stage when attending a live production), yet the narrators repeat what we already know with their redundant "said Susan" and "said Anne" lines. Here Stein, like Woolf, creates a reading experience in which nearly everything is

the mother of us all

AN OPERA IN 2 ACTS

act I, scene 1

Prologue

A room in the house of Susan B. Anthony

Susan B. Anthony and Anne seated by a table with a lamp. Anne is knitting. Susan B. is pasting clippings in a scrapbook. Gertrude S. and Virgil T. are standing near the proscenium, right and left. They sing only to the audience.

WORDS
BY
GERTRUDE STEIN

MUSIC
BY
VIRGIL THOMSON

(♩ = 96) Susan B. Anthony *ff*

Yes I was, Anne

Gertrude S. You mean you are,

said Su-san. Virgil T.

said Anne.

(♩ = 96)
Curtain

Piano (Drums) *ff* *sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *f*

S. B. No, no. When this you see re-mem-ber me,

A. I do,

G. S. said Su-san, said Su-san B.

V. T. said Anne.

M.P.I. - 550

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repeated, but with slight variation.

What is the purpose of such dizzying circularity? In his book *The American Play: 1787-2000*, Marc Robinson presents Stein as not only pushing, but actually shifting the boundaries of what it meant to consume a piece of theatre in the early part of the twentieth century. Stein reconceived plays as what she called “landscapes,” sweeping vistas that

demand the same openness to simultaneity and multiple focus, the same ability to see (and think) horizontally rather than vertically. In *Byron A Play*, she put this idea concisely: “A play is when there is not only a so but also.” A mode of spectatorship that takes “also” as its motto shuns a long-held ideal – viewers transfixed by single images, in thrall to mesmerizing characters and engrossing situations, boring into a field of view until its vein of pleasure is exhausted. Instead, they set out in many directions, touching lightly over incidents and keeping all possible meanings in play at once. (188)

Here, the eye and the mind are asked to open to many possibilities at once, causing a play to act as a vessel holding innumerable semantic threads rather than a piece of art advocating its viewer to come away with one overarching message. And so, when something is introduced in Stein's drama, not only is its opposite always also introduced, but also its double, and its double's double, and so on, ad infinitum.

Moreover, I would add to Robinson's analysis the importance of the ear to this type of “dramatic scaffolding.” It is through sounds, rhyming, and play with echo that *The Mother of Us All* performs many of its horizontal layerings and repetitions. In Act One

Scene One, Anne asks Susan B. “Why do you not speak louder?,” and Susan responds, “I speak as loudly as I can. I even speak louder. I even speak louder than I can.” Virgil T. takes over, saying “It was dark and as it was dark it was necessary to speak louder or very softly, very softly” (23). In addition to the play's theme of women's oppression and voicelessness due to the lack of suffrage in America, this passage also plays with volume in a spectral way. Stein introduces the idea of how loud one *should* be speaking, as well as how loud one is *able* to speak, how loud one *desires* to speak, and how appropriate volume may be at a specific time. Stretching the accepted opposition between speech and silence into a spectrum of possibilities affected by complex social interplay, the opera here invites us to return to the connection between silence and disenfranchisement and interrogate this subject in a more nuanced, careful way. Is it possible that Susan B. is in fact being silenced even as her voice grows louder?

Moving from the theme of speaking to listening, Susan B. says a few pages later about men: “Listen, they listen to me. [...] Everyone and you each one and you they all do, they all listen to me. Well let them deny it, all the same they do. They do listen to me, all the men do. They cannot either see or hear unless I tell them so, poor things” (25). Here the imperative first “listen” could apply either to the audience/reader or to Anne, who is also on stage. It is also possible, intriguingly, for her to be speaking to Gertrude S., who is also on stage at this time. This introduces the power dynamic inherent between an author and her character. Susan B. is essentially ventriloquized by her creator, Gertrude Stein, and yet here, she is potentially forcing that relationship to flow in reverse, asking Stein to listen to what she, Susan, has to say. Again, Susan is clearly fighting forced

voicelessness throughout, but the dynamics of this struggle is increasingly complexified, here expanding to include even the text's creator.

This ambiguity of addressees continues as Susan says “everyone and you each one and you they all do,” bouncing her statement between single and multiple referents, paratactically adding to the possible destinations of her statement, and multiplying the dialogic possibilities prismatically. The opera's preoccupation with aural perception and control (“They cannot either see or hear unless I tell them so”) continues when Susan B. states, in Act One Scene Two,

Susan B.: I hear a sound

Jo: Yes well,

Daniel W.: Do not hear a sound. When I am told.

Susan B.: Silence. (47)

Here, the ostensibly passive act of hearing is recast as a potentially submissive act of obeying, reminiscent of *The Taming of the Shrew's* Petruchio convincing Katherine that it is in fact the moon she sees instead of the sun, saying “It shall be moon, or star, or what I list” (Shakespeare 89). This Shakespearean allusion might not be too much of a referential stretch, considering that this too is a text about a wayward woman fighting a patriarchal social order. As well, the following exchange between Susan and Daniel echoes Katherine's struggle with oppression:

Susan B.: Shall I protest? Not while I live and breathe. I shall protest. Shall I protest? Shall I protest while I live and breathe?

Daniel W.: When my eyes shall be turned to behold for the

last time the sun in heav'n.

Susan B.: Yes. (55)

Additionally, in Act One Scene Three, Jo the Loiterer sings, “Naughty men they quarrel so. Quarrel about what? [...] About how late the moon can rise. About how soon the earth can turn. About how naked are the stars” (63). These types of linkages are available because Stein continuously opens her text to referential possibilities; with the above passages we are able to ponder the impossibility of following a command not to hear a sound, or see the sun, and the inherently peculiar and artificial conditions created and maintained by an oppressive dynamic.

Like *Between the Acts*, the form of the circle recurs in Stein's opera too, adding another layer of repetition with difference, or *revolution*, to the text. It should be noted that Stein was very fond of the circle, as evident by her choice to write, in 1920, *A Circular Play: A Play in Circles*. As Ulla E. Dydo writes in her book *A Stein Reader*, the form of the circle came to represent for Stein a geometrical manifestation of her avant-garde aesthetic practice:

A Circular Play is only one of many Stein pieces built on circles, round, cycles.

The texts of circles appear in innumerable guises, each time a new charm a new ring, an oval, an eye, an orifice, a mouth. The linear printed shape of “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” in “Sacred Emily” curls into the magic circle of her seal, which turns into a cauliflower, centered and sacred, a new form of essence of a rose. Like the Möbius strip, the world of Stein's work has no beginning, middle, or end, and her perceptions back in upon themselves in a continual process that

makes inside and outside indistinguishable, one, complete only in its continuing. A Stein reader is wise to remember that like stones dropped into a quiet pool, her word ideas make circles upon new and unexpected circles in her work. (326)

This circularity allows her to introduce oppositions without the need to resolve them in conflict, and this is often manifested grammatically, such as when Susan B. declares, “I who am not patient am patient” (51). Here, the main clause of the sentence, “I am patient,” is undermined by its subordinate clause, “who am *not* patient,” causing the statement to exist in a strange, conceptually mobile state of flux between two dichotomous poles.

And the circularities continue. In Act One Scene Two, Virgil T. begins by entreating the audience to empathize with oppressors, since everything naturally and, presumably, quite rightly, comes full circle:

Why pity the poor persecutor? Pity the poor persecutor because the poor persecutor always gets to be poor. [...] That's why, when the poor persecutor is persecuted, he has to cry. Because the persecutor always ends by being persecuted. That is the reason why. (31-32)

The alliterative, percussive “p” sound here works to build repetition aurally into what is already, conceptually, a circular statement (what goes around comes around). Stein continues this theme as Daniel Webster enters the scene, talking about a hole in the ground his father dug and then fell into: “He digged a pit, he digged it deep, he digged it for his brother. Into the pit he did fall in, the pit he digged for his brother. Daniel was my father's name. [...] Not Daniel in the lion's den” (33). A few pages later, Constance

Fletcher says “I do and I do not declare that roses and wreathes, wreathes and roses around and around, blind as a bat, curled as a hat and a plume, be mine when I die” (43). This not only references Stein's famous “rose is a rose” statement cited above (which she famously painted in a circle above her bed), but it also employs, once again, oppositions (“I do and do not”), rhyme (“bat,” “hat”), echo (“around and around”), and reversal (“roses and wreathes, wreathes and roses”) in order to spiral and twist Constance's words.

In his essay “Line,” J. Hillis Miller argues that all texts contain such moments of instability or undecidability: Derridean aporias. For example, “all etymology is false etymology,” he writes, suggesting that for every word a text offers its reader, other words and semantic undertones are simultaneously and inevitably introduced, even if they remain outside of the text, even if they subvert the original word's meaning (234).

Language, therefore, is always unmanageably delinquent, and neither the author nor the reader can, in the end, control its meaning with any certainty. He continues:

some bend or discontinuity always breaks up the etymological line. If the line suggests always the gatherings of the word, at the same time, in all the places of its use, the line contains the possibility of turning back on itself. In this turning it subverts its own linearity and becomes repetition. Without the line there is no repetition, but repetition is what disturbs, suspends, or destroys the line's linearity, like a soft wintry aurora playing behind its straightforward logic. (234)

Here etymological relationships are conceived as familial lines, family trees upon which new branches continue to unpredictably spring. And so, when Stein writes “When the mariner has been tossed for many days in thick weather on an unknown sea he naturally

avails himself of the first pause in the storm,” she not only invokes Coleridge's famous Ancient Mariner, who struggles for days on the sea to come to terms with his perception's relationship to reality, but she also introduces, through the use of the word “pause,” a concept of caesura, or break (*The Mother of Us All* 48). A pause can denote multiple definitions, including a musical “character denoting an interval of silence; a rest,” or a linguistic “break marking juncture, sometimes regarded as having phonemic status,” or “a short interval of silence or inaction, *esp.* one arising from uncertainty, doubt, or reflection; an intermission; a delay, a hesitation” (OED). Stein introduces any, indeed arguably *all* of the semantic possibilities connected to the word “pause,” whether she wishes to or not. The context in which we find the word, here a symbolic or metaphoric employment of storminess and voyage, only works to extend, rather than restrict, the semantic possibilities.

Continuing this excavation of the necessarily mercurial nature of textual language, and echoing Dydo's characterizations of Stein's texts, Miller writes that

In one way or another the monological becomes dialogical, the unitary thread of language something *like a Möbius strip*, with two sides and yet only one side. An alternative metaphor would be that of a complex knot of many crossings. Such a knot may be in one region untied, made unperplexed, but only at the expense of making a tangle of knotted crossings at some other point on the loop. The number of crossings remains stubbornly the same. (236, *emph. added*)

Here, we see yet another critical attempt to explain textual complexity by way of its shape or, in other words, rendering a text spatial in order to analyze it. Additionally, the figure of

the loop and the suggestion that meaning can turn and knot itself in various directions allows for the possibility that Stein's (and therefore Woolf's) circular repetitions take advantage of the circularity *already* inherent in text, rather than creating it anew.

Another affinity Stein's opera holds with *Between the Acts* is the way in which she troubles the divisibility of the line between sound and silence, including during a prelude to Act One Scene Four in which no speaking whatsoever occurs. No character is seen on stage, and no voice is present to which to listen. Yet, we are given thirty two bars of music, to be played *senza espressione*, or “without expression” (66). This is a curious direction, given that here the audience is meant to sit and listen to instrumental music without lyrical accompaniment. Without any linguistic cues, their imaginations are free to wander, and yet the author and composer refuse to give them easily identifiable emotional cues such as a thundering crescendo or soft, light, sentimental staccato notes. A “prelude” can also refer to “a preliminary play, performed before the main play,” and this short musical introduction to the scene necessarily contains its own narrative beyond the function of merely a linking or connective device; what that narrative might be, however, remains quite elusive: silent (OED).

The opening of the next scene sees Susan B in a day dream, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, saying “I do not know whether I am asleep or awake, awake or asleep, asleep or awake. Do I know?” (67). She hovers in this liminal space until Jo the Loiterer steps in with an authoritative voice and says “I know, you are awake Susan B.” (67). This is a somewhat ironic line for a loiterer to utter, since one who loiters is, of course, in some liminal state themselves. Jo is, in some sense, caught between leaving and

arriving, taking too long to progress or move forward; idly standing by while others continue on their way. He is often a voice of moderation or safe questioning in the opera, a male character who, in contrast to Ulysses S. Grant whose aggressive patriarchal stance consistently overwhelms the opera's other voices, stands by and observes, interjecting with comments and questions here and there. This continued attention on betweenness and liminality suggests that Stein, along with Woolf, chooses to linger in these spaces in which two polarities are able, and permitted, to exist simultaneously.

Jo is also, importantly, the character most closely associated with silence. In Act One Scene Five, Ulysses S. Grant loudly declares, “Didn't I say I do not like noise, I do not like cannon balls, I do not like storms, I do not like talking, I do not like noise. I like everything and everybody to be silent. Everybody be silent” (92-93). Jo very quietly responds, “I know I was silent, everybody can tell just by listening to me just how silent I am, dear General, dear General Ulysses, dear General Ulysses Simpson Grant, am I not a perfect example of what you like, am I not silent” (94)? Within this short passage (which is of course quite comical considering how many words it takes for Jo to explain how silent he is), we can see evidence of Stein's linguistic experimentation with musical fugue. The same line is repeated three times, and yet something is added each time, causing meaning to accrue despite the movement of returning again to the original utterance: “*General, dear General Ulysses, dear General Ulysses Simpson Grant.*” This has the effect of strengthening, rather than diminishing Jo's voice. Even though he is directed to sing very softly, or *pianissimo* in contrast to Ulysses' *fortissimo*, Jo's statement begs for attention the more he repeats himself. While it might be easy to ignore a single

verbalization of one's name, it is nearly impossible to ignore three, especially when they are said in increasing levels of specificity (title, title plus first name, title plus first, middle, and last name).

In his discussion of Stein's earlier opera, *Four Saints In Three Acts*, Brad Bucknell argues that it is precisely this interplay between progression and return that makes Stein's work particularly unique. Her writing, he believes,

requires the maintenance of the possibility of meaning, the sustaining of coherence. But this possibility must remain secondary to the fitful dispensations of a writing which always interferes with itself. Stein writes against the line, against the inherent “meaning” of progression and continuity as these are either depicted in the narrative unfolding of a causal chain of events or in a language whose syntagmatic operations play against their own rules. In other words, Stein's language maintains a double sense of instrumentality (as something functioning in the possibility of a meaning beyond itself) and as a phenomenon in itself, as its own field of perceptual confrontation. (169)

Taking this into account, a phrase such as Susan B.'s “to be poor, is to be so poor they listen and listen and what they hear well what do they hear, they hear that they listen and they listen to hear” becomes at once an auditory and linguistic mirror (hear, listen/listen hear) but also, when examined more closely, a syntactic structure that actually denotes a progression of meaning (78).

Though it appears at first to be a relatively simple, oscillating play between the words “hear” and “listen,” the semantic difference between the act of hearing and

listening is actually quite stark. While both involve auditory perception, of course, to hear is to perceive something automatically, while to *listen* is to do so attentively; with effort. The poor, then, according to Susan B., are caught within a circular pattern: they are told they have the freedom to listen (“they hear that they listen), to choose what to pay attention to, but in fact the only thing they are able to do, in the end, is involuntarily hear everyone else's voice—(“they listen [only to] to hear”). Because of the way in which Stein uses the same words to consistently denote different, and often contradictory meanings, potential interpretation is, as you can see, often labourious and tentative, at best. That the possibilities are only extended, instead of contracted by her syntactic style is, I would agree with Bucknell, a direct result of her untraditional form.

Like Woolf, Stein incorporates the idea of silence and hearing into her text not only thematically, but formally as well. *The Mother of Us All*, because it is at once a literary text and a piece of music, has the interesting quality of containing both musical rests, which are somewhat paradoxical in that they signify the *lack* of sound, but also spaces between words that correspond to these rests, creating numerous moments of two-tiered (sometimes more, when multiple characters' parts rest simultaneously) silences. In *Reading Voices*, Garrett Stewart introduces the term “phonemic zero” in reference to Woolf's acoustic experimentation in *The Waves*, defining it as

that ambivalent juncture between silence and sound at the edge of certain lexical bondings. This is the border between absence and the differentiations from that absence (in the first place, and thereafter) by which speech is raised upon a silence into which it repeatedly fades back. If, in other words, the zero in arithmetic must

logically be held to as a preliminary as well as eliminary point of departure, and then held off from there on, canceled from integer to integer as a principle of negation and converted to one of augmentation, may we not perceive a comparable logic of intervals in transcribed speech? From word to word a ceaseless yielding to and then abolishment of phonemic lapse? Especially when the apparent phonemic interruption between words has been called the “zero allophone”? Suture may thereby preserve for semiosis those moments or nodes that seem merely to keep silent, keep silence in place, make room for wording. In this sense suture may be found to negotiate the rules and ambiguities of lexical closure and adjunction, allowing for the very seams between words, *the apparent gaps that are in fact ligatures*, the nonce values covertly enounced into sequence. (269-70, emph. added)

Although I think his choice to use the word *suture* suggests a particular woundedness to texts that, in keeping with my movement away from trauma theory I would like to avoid, I think Stewart's analysis of silence is uniquely resonant. Not only does he conceive of linguistics in mathematical, and therefore also relatedly musical terms, he more specifically attempts to escape silence's status as mere absence in favour of a much more complex, spectral mapping of silence as a degree of sound or *ligature*; a tightening or loosening of sound's hold on any given sentence. He is also able to avoid the often upheld primacy of sound through his description of zero (silence's mathematical analogue) as always at once present *and* absent in the movement up the numerical scale.

Taking this approach into account, Stein's simultaneous rests and linguistic

intervals become mutually reinforcing, such as in the following exchange between Daniel Webster and Angel More, in which I have signified the musical rests by inserting “[rest]”:

Daniel Webster: Dear Angel More, dear Angel More [rest], there have been men who have stammered and stuttered but [rest] not, [rest] not I.

Angel More: Speak louder.

Daniel Webster: Not I. (97)

The resultant effect of these doubled silences is, oddly enough, an added emphasis. In those spaces where both words and notes fall still—when text and music dovetail in this way—an interesting stress occurs. This also contributes to aural and rhythmic differences even within linguistic twins; “Dear Angel More” and “dear Angel More [rest],” for example, become two distinguishable lines when the musical rest that reinforces the natural pause after the word “More” is taken into account. Furthermore, Webster’s repetition of the word “not” is more noticeable because it is enclosed within musical *and* lexical silence, causing us to pay attention to its replay even more, perhaps, than we would otherwise. Like Jo the Loiterer wordily declaring how silent he is, Daniel stutters slightly even as he claims to never stammer or stutter. There is here, again, a playful tension, subtly manifested, between the semantic and acoustic aspects of the words.

Taking into account the way in which both aural and visual space between words and notes can shift how a particular line or section of the text is read/heard, Stein’s text can be conceived of as a constant negotiation between positive and negative space: a perpetually moving, grid-like structure. In *Untwisting the Serpent*, Daniel Albright analyzes Stein’s *An Elucidation*, of which the following is a short sample:

I think I won't

I think I will

I think I will

I think I won't.

I think I won't

I think I will

I think I will

I think I won't.

I think I won't (qtd. in Albright 320)

Albright argues that this text acts as

a checkerboard, a design in black and white squares, represented by positive and negative propositions: the pattern slowly shifts from a two-by-two layout to a one-by-one layout, until the end, where Stein experiments with an almost all-black segment. (320)

Though manifested differently than in *An Elucidation*, a similar construction is at play in *The Mother Of Us All*. The interplay between sound and silence formally constructs the negative/positive checkerboard effect Albright outlines, however this could potentially be said about *all* texts, since they all contain spaces between words and rhythmic caesuras. The additional thematic checkerboard construction evident in *An Elucidation*, the interplay between “I will” and “I won't,” between possibility and impossibility, is made manifest in *The Mother Of Us All* in the strange instances of contradictory speech: the verbalization of one's silence, for example, or the stammering on about how one does not

stutter. These oppositions are given space to exist simultaneously: one assertion is undermined by its opposite *even as* it is asserted. This creates the movement of the grid or checkerboard: a constant negotiation between poles, between positive and negative space.

This type of movement can also be described as a type of skipping, or simultaneous progression/regression, such as in the example “I (who am not patient) am patient.” Something is asserted, then undermined, causing the circularity discussed above, the lack of progress, but also a pendulum-like swinging between opposites. At the very end of the opera, Susan B. says

We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards.

We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but. But we do not retrace our steps. (153-154)

Once again, form artfully aligns with content and, in a pageant about progressive politics and giving women the right to legally vocalize their decisions, the character responsible for this forward momentum is, in some important sense, stuck on repeat. Not only is Stein cautioning against easily lauded ideas of social reform, but she is also introducing a sense of fear into this ostensibly stoic and single-minded character. The future is certainly gestured toward when Susan B. stands on a pedestal mimicking, and being mistaken for a statue of herself: frozen in commemoration. Repetition without difference is dangerous here (“we cannot retrace our steps”), and yet the movement of return is always necessary for Stein. It is in that slight variation, in the added rest or twist of sound, that her text opens, like Woolf’s, to life, and to change.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: Silence, Repetition, and Politics

“It is surely arguable that if feminist critics cannot produce a positive political and literary assessment of Woolf’s writing, then the fault may lie with their own critical and theoretical perspectives rather than with Woolf’s texts.”

-- Toril Moi, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” 9

I have thus far attempted to situate Stein and Woolf within the artistic conversations surrounding music, silence, and repetition that were taking place in the early twentieth century, and it is clear that both writers attempt something new and radical with their work. I would like to end with the tentative suggestion that there is a political and ideological decision that both Woolf and Stein are making when introducing these aesthetic choices into their work. I suggest this tentatively because I believe it remains difficult, always, to pull a firm ideological position out of a piece of art, although this is nonetheless undertaken by critics all the time. Historically, and within feminist scholarship in particular, the movement from silence to speech is regarded as a movement out of oppression into liberation. As Wendy Brown writes in her essay “Freedom’s Silences,”

Those historically excluded from liberal personhood have proceeded against the spectrum of silences limning the universal claims of humanist discourse for the past several centuries. Jews, immigrants, women, people of colour, homosexuals, the unpropertied: all have pressed themselves into civic belonging not simply through asserting their personhood but through politicizing—articulating—the silent workings of their internally excluded presence within prevailing notions of personhood. (84)

It is no wonder, then, that silence continues to act as an analogy and metaphor for oppression and powerlessness. The freedom to express one's self, to vocalize one's story; the refusal to be silenced by those in power – these are all notions that are now commonly aligned with the struggle of marginalized peoples. As bell hooks writes,

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. (qtd. in Glenn 20)

I would like to suggest, however, that it is actually (and perhaps even somewhat counterintuitively) *silence*, and not its opposite, that performs this function for these two authors. What occurs when silence is re-imagined as a potentially productive space, one that may even be a site of political resistance? I suggest that it is the power to wield silence, to choose when *not* to speak, that in fact energizes and makes continuously relevant both of these texts.

In her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn attempts to work against the conventional notion, upheld in virtually every field from philosophy to art to linguistics, that silence is subordinate to speech, and that sound necessarily signals power. In her examination of the intellectual history of silence, she quotes Bernard Dauenhauer's *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance*, a work that attempts to define silence outside of its common associations with emptiness or nothingness in order to uncover what he believes to be silence's profound ontological implications. He writes:

silence interrupts an 'and so forth' of some particular stream of intentional performances which intend determinate objects of some already specified sort. As

such, [...] silence is not the correlative opposite of discourse, but rather establishes and maintains an oscillation or tension among the several levels of discourse and between the domain of discourse and the domains of nonpredicative experience. (qtd. in Glenn 8)

It is, in other words, the way in which silence can render a text radically *open* to discourse, rather than closed to it, that consistently subverts the quest for certainty, linearity, and logical form. Examined with this view in mind, textual representations of silence such as those found in *Between the Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* become endlessly meaningful, rather than continuously foreclosing upon semantic possibility.

Is it fair, however, to categorize this type of writing as implicitly political? In his book *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, Stuart Sim outlines the political, philosophical, and aesthetic history of silence. The notion of that which is “unsayable,” he argues, has concerned philosophers from antiquity to the present day, and functions ideologically as a “deliberately engineered absence putting a particular debate in a new light, and forcing us to reconsider our assumptions and objectives” (86). Silence often serves as the zero-limit of thought for many philosophers; it is that which we can never truly access or predict, a characteristic which, Sim argues, is simultaneously celebrated by post-structuralist thinkers and challenged by the analytic tradition.

In his chapter entitled “Why Silence Matters: The Arts,” Sims locates what he calls “the retreat from the word” in such experimental pieces as Samuel Beckett's play *Breath*, John Cage's composition *4' 33"* and, extending even into visual art, Kasimir Malevich's painting *White Square on a White Ground* (111). These works ask us, he

believes, to re-evaluate not just our thoughts on aesthetic form, but nothing less than “the human condition itself” (111). While I remain unsure just how the mechanics of silence manage to continually threaten our sense of comfort and predictability just enough to cause some kind of shift, however subtle; I am convinced that it indeed continues to do so—in literature and elsewhere. Sim finds the silence of modernist novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* in the vast interiorities to which the reader and the character alone are privy. He links this with the psychoanalytic model of surface versus latent meaning, and finds the modernist silence's theoretical counterpart in repression: “the deeper silence of the unconscious” (143). Should we choose to follow this path, however, we are left held captive, once again, by a traumatic narrative that will always look the same, and lead us back, inevitably, to the insufficient notion of a wounded text.

I wonder whether the way out of this theoretical bind might be to couple the idea of silence with the idea of repetition, a theoretical interplay about which I think both of these cryptic texts, as I have attempted to show, are concerned. In his book *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, J. Hillis Miller suggests that

the history of Western ideas of repetition begins, like our culture generally, with the Bible on the one hand and with Homer, the Pre-Socratics, and Plato on the other. [...] The modern history of ideas about repetition goes by way of Vico to Hegel and the German Romantics, to Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, to Marx (in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, to Freud's notion of the compulsion to repeat, to the Joyce of *Finnegan's Wake*, on down to such diverse present-day theorists as Jacques Lacan or Gilles Deleuze, Mircea

Eliade or Jacques Derrida. (5)

Following the history of this early ideological bifurcation, Miller suggests that our contemporary understanding of the concept of repetition still rests between what he calls, following Deleuze, repetition's two "forms." These are the Platonic form, which posits an original ground or foundation upon which subsequent recurrences and repetitions rest and to which they continue to refer, and the Nietzschean world of "ungrounded doublings" based entirely on difference. Here, every repetition is an echo of another occurrence (and recognizable because of this similarity), and yet no two instances are ever exactly alike, and there is no hierarchy established between doubles (6).

The tension between these two models is what continues to animate, according to Miller, contemporary discussions concerning art and repetition, and it is the inherence of both forms that most interests him. As he points out, this relationship between the two forms naturally "defies the elementary principle of logic, the law of non-contradiction which says: 'Either A or not-A,'" and it is through this deconstructionist starting point that Miller sets out to prove that seven novels, among them Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, indeed operate within both repetitive frameworks simultaneously (17). In fact, Miller argues, one repetitive form necessarily implies the other since, as in the case with any oppositional structure, one term relies upon the other. I include the following passage for two reasons: one, it lays the groundwork for what I believe to be a productive and new way of thinking about Woolf's and Stein's aesthetics as participating in a radical politics of form, and two, because of the ease with which Miller slips into a Freudian framework: "Each form of repetition," he writes,

calls upon the other, by *an inevitable compulsion*. The second is the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out. If logical, daylight resemblances depend upon a third thing, on a principle of identity which precedes them, the opaque similarities of dream are baseless, or, if based at all, then based on the difference between the two things. They create in the gap of that difference a third thing, what Benjamin calls the image [*das Bild*]. The image is the meaning generated by the echoing of two dissimilar things in the second form of repetition. It is neither in the first nor in the second nor in some ground which preceded both, but in between, in the empty space which the opaque similarity crosses. *Freud's early discovery of the hysterical trauma is an example of this.* (9 emph. added)

I would like to suggest that it is this opening up of a gap, both with the use of silence and repetition (and indeed the repetition of silence), that Woolf and Stein access such an “in between.” The reason why this to be political work is precisely because neither do so by making the move to the all-too readily available narrative of the traumatic lacuna or void; the move that so many thinkers, including Miller, suggest is inevitable and even, perhaps, logical. It is important, moreover, to keep in mind that the Freudian framework was absolutely accessible to both Stein and Woolf, as Freud's writings on the unconscious were not only well-circulated during this time period but were, in fact, first published in English by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press. The reason I believe both writers' movement away from a narrative of trauma to be a specifically *feminist* political project is because it offers a way out of criticism's (and, more generally, society's) constant

connection between female writers and psychological distress.

As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, both texts are participating in a complex aesthetic conversation that has something to do with the significance of sound. A specific acoustic sensibility runs throughout both *Between the Acts* and *The Mother Of Us All* in such a way as to render these books audible, heard pieces of art. Woolf perforates her text with ellipses and gaps that, when examined closely, point not to repressed psychological trauma, but rather to an auditory landscape, what Garret Stewart calls a “phonemic microdrama [...] the oscillation of words as sonic waves, the quiver and the flux, the flux and reflux, of silently voiced phrasing” (260).

Brown warns against solidifying the implications between silence and oppression (which here, I would align with psychological repression and the inability to voice the story of one's own life). She writes:

it is also possible to make a fetish of breaking silence. It is possible as well that this ostensible tool of emancipation carries its own techniques of subjugation—that it converges with unemancipatory tendencies in contemporary culture, establishes regulatory norms, coincides with the disciplinary power of ubiquitous confessional practices; in short, it may feed the powers it meant to starve. (84)

Within Woolf studies, such a fetishism has, I contend, secured a firm hold. Unfortunately, the scathing accusations which Toril Moi aimed at feminist scholarship in 1985 in her influential essay “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf” may in fact remain quite pertinent today. Woolf, she writes,

has yet to be adequately welcomed and acclaimed by her feminist daughters in

England and America. To date she has either been rejected by them as insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds that seem to exclude her fiction. By their more or less unwitting subscription to the humanist aesthetic categories of the traditional male academic hierarchy, feminist critics have seriously undermined the impact of their challenge to that very institution. (18)

This is of course not the case, however, with the state of Stein scholarship, though this second critical arena is, it should be noted, a vastly smaller intellectual pool. Stein's text, however, offers a potential way out of the pathologizing stance so often taken toward Woolf not only because *The Mother Of Us All* clearly plays with sound in a similarly sophisticated way as *Between the Acts*, but also because the opera thematically, as I have argued, warns against making too easily the connection between vocalization and personal freedom. Through the intriguingly comic yet multifaceted characterisation of Susan B., Stein asks us to re-evaluate what freedom means in relation to voice, at what cost speaking for the sake of speaking might come, and how very much *like* freedom oppression can appear when it is housed within an ideologically liberatory infrastructure.

Whether it is because of their use of the aesthetics of sound that Woolf and Stein are able escape the psychoanalytic narrative of loss I remain unsure. It would no doubt be interesting, however, to re-cast Benjamin's concept of "image"—the "third thing" to which Miller so intriguingly links to an "echoing"—in acoustic terms. I end here with the hope that more scholarship be undertaken to discuss these writers, and Woolf especially, outside of the sphere of psychoanalytic criticism—a theoretical approach that has only, thus far, managed to re-diagnose an already overly pathologized artist.

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