

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Re-Presentation

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Now that Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* has been made into a film representing yet another echo of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is worth investigating just how the later novel conceives its relation to its predecessor. Because *The Hours* directly takes the role of literature as one of its subjects, it may provide a model for considering postmodern artistic re-presentation more generally.

Such re-telling or re-presentation of an earlier work of art is rife in post-modernity, and not just in fiction. Consider Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*, John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, the rock opera *Rome and Jewels*, or the gospel version of *Messiah, Too Hot to Handel* as a random sampling from a long list. Although this kind of postmodern re-presentation has been condemned as pastiche or ironic parody,¹ the practice is nothing new. The notion that art must be brand-new, a kind of large-scale urban renewal project forever starting from scratch is mostly drawn from modernism. Many earlier art forms acknowledged their predecessors and borrowed liberally from both the structure and content of earlier models. One has only to consider the various versions of *Faust* or the models for Shakespeare's plays or Palladio's borrowing from classical forms or the later borrowing from Palladio or the habits of composers writing variations on earlier themes to acknowledge a venerable tradition of artistic repetition. In echoing this history, the arts of postmodernism suggest something more traditional than modernism, but they may be attempting something new as well, a departure as well as a return. But the "something new" is not easy to characterize. It eludes our grasp.

Much has been written about giving voice to the silences within the tradition, about opening it up to alternative perspectives, and certainly this is one of the effects of several of the postmodern works cited above, and of many more besides. The attempt to highlight the perspective of the "other" underscores the postmodern preoccupation with difference. But these gestures toward pluralism, however desirable and effective, reduce the postmodern aesthetic to a largely political or ethical purpose. It is worth considering what else is going on besides this opening to new voices. For example, what can we discover about the postmodern idea of art in works that echo and transform their predecessors? Cunningham's novel is a rich source for investigating this question because of its explicit focus on the role of literature and by extension the role of art or creativity more generally.

I am not concerned here with the many ways in which *The Hours* both echoes and extends the narrative of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Let it suffice that the characters of the later novel recall those of the former: A woman named Clarissa plunges into the city to buy flowers for her party; a crazed poet who plunges to his death disturbs her party. Figures from the characters' pasts resurface in recollection and again in person on the day of the party, thereby breaking open the novel's temporal structure of a single day with myriad journeys into the past. In both works there is a luncheon party to which Clarissa is not invited, and in both works Clarissa worries about the questionable influence of a strident ideologue over her daughter. Although *The Hours* contains a similar cast of characters to those of *Mrs. Dalloway* and repeats the themes of love and death and time, Michael Cunningham does not simply ape the structure of *Mrs. Dalloway* and transpose it to New York in the late twentieth century. He takes an important but nonetheless minor theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's intense youthful passion for Sally Seton, and considerably expands it in the later novel. Clarissa and Sally are lovers and many of the main characters are gay. Here we find the recycled fragments of the postmodern novel and the opening to new voices.

Those two elements are not my focus. Instead I am limiting our subject to the central image of the plunge in *Mrs. Dalloway* that is echoed in the later novel. In Woolf's novel this image paradoxically identifies Clarissa's plunge into life in preparation for her party (3) with the plunge of Septimus, the mad poet, toward death (184). *The Hours* repeats the same identification of the plunge into life (9) and the plunge toward death (199–203), continuing the watery imagery of the earlier novel, with its ripples widening in circles. These elements allow Cunningham to expand on the permeable boundaries between life and death that Woolf explores and on the widening circles that connect one person or event to another, moving toward the uncharted horizon. The plunge and its associated meanings are ultimately linked to the role of literature, especially in *The Hours* and, more generally in both novels, to the act of creation.

The Hours repeats from *Mrs Dalloway* a second image that is related to the idea of the plunge, the concept of moments when time "bursts open," as if defying the

relentless procession of hour after hour by which chronological time unfolds. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, one such moment, experienced by Septimus, is explicitly related to both poetic inspiration and death:

The word "time" split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself—(69–70)

In *The Hours*, such moments are also associated with literary inspiration (210–11), death (225–26), and a kiss (210). Both of these images, the plunge and the burst bonds of time, suggest a mysterious passage across what are ordinarily taken to be insuperable barriers, like the march of the hours or the division between one isolated consciousness and another. Both of these images are related to Woolf's famous assertion that "[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope that surrounds us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (*Common Reader* 212).

As Hermione Lee has written, Woolf carried on a revealing correspondence with the painter Jacques Raverat toward the end of her writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Raverat had complained of the "essentially linear" nature of writing. It is almost impossible, he argued, to express the way a mind responds, where "splashes in the outer air" are accompanied "under the surface" by "waves that follow one another into dark and forgotten corners." The novelist responded that the writer must go beyond the "formal railway line of sentence" and show how people "feel or think or dream . . . all over the place" (Lee 16).

In this correspondence we have an implicit connection between Woolf's "Life is not a series of gig lamps" and the imagery of waves, water, floating boats, and the plunge into life and death that is one of the controlling metaphors of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Because *The Hours* echoes and extends that imagery, we need first to explore its source in Woolf's novel. She clearly *intends the imagery of waves and water to suggest the vast concentric circles of interconnection that unite the disparate characters of the novel, as well as the unfathomable depths beneath the surface of their thoughts and actions.* These connections are made quite explicit in the lines early in *Mrs. Dalloway* expressing Clarissa's thoughts of death in the midst of her delighted plunge into the streets of London:

Or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home [. . .] part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best [. . .] but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (9)

This watery imagery implies an animating principle that supplies the interconnection between people and between people and the natural world, a fabric that, as Clarissa felt, defies death. Or rather death may represent an entire release into unity with the world. That these thoughts occur to Clarissa as she plunges into the "divine vitality" of the life of the city, the divine vitality that she loved, seems to imply a key connection between this vitality and death.

The same connection is strengthened by the clear identification of Clarissa and Septimus, the society woman who plunges into life and the tormented poet who plunges to his death. They are united not only by the "plunge" but also by their recollections of Shakespeare, especially the lines from *Cymbeline*:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages (cited in Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 30, 39, 139)

The ambiguity of these lines is telling. They suggest the consolations of death but alternatively the possibility of endurance or maturity that distances one from the "heat o' the sun." Here we have the parallel conditions of Septimus and Clarissa. Both of them experience the extreme danger and precariousness of life (8), and both experience the possibility of fire or conflagration (5, 140, 168). Yet, Clarissa chooses endurance and Septimus self-destruction. We might consider these to be opposite responses, and in many ways they are, but when Clarissa ponders Septimus's death by suicide, "she [feels] somehow very like him" (186).

She considers his choice of death with penetrating sympathy. "A thing there was that mattered; [. . .]" she thinks. "This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them [. . .]" (184). It is as if Clarissa sees death as an attempt to protect what matters in life, a tribute, a lunge toward the central mystery, and a gesture to others. She feels this deeply, as she does her indebtedness to Septimus: "Had he plunged," she wonders, "holding his treasure?" (184). "He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (186).

Septimus's effect on Clarissa is profound. His taking of his own life confirms her in her own endurance. Yet she also recognizes in him a kinship, as if both understand what must be preserved at all costs, against all the forces that can create a kind of death in life, and "force the soul." Both recognize that what matters are those moments when the march of time, its presence repeatedly marked in *Mrs. Dalloway* by the ringing of Big Ben, bursts open, its relentless motion halted momentarily by some priceless illumination that rends the daily fabric.

The plunge in *Mrs. Dalloway*, then, represents a form of apprehension and mysterious transmission of what is most precious in life. At the same instant that Clarissa plunges into London to buy the flowers, she recalls her plunge into the open air at Bourton at the age of 18, the time when she had loved Sally, and Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh had courted her. Later Peter recalls Clarissa's conviction, imparted to him at Bourton, that we live on in others:

since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting places after death . . . (153)

In the next paragraph after we encounter this belief of Clarissa's in the thoughts of Peter Walsh, like a circle of water within a circle, we are privy to Peter's recognition that "the effect of [his encounters with Clarissa over thirty years] was immeasurable. There was a mystery about it. [. . .] She had influenced him more than any person he had ever known" (153). In this set of passages Clarissa's thoughts become part of Peter's, as her whole being had become part of his. In life then, as in death, the unseen parts of ourselves spread wide and live in others. Perhaps this is why parties, for Clarissa, are "an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?" (122). Perhaps this is why she felt called upon

when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to perhaps [. . .]. (37)

What is being suggested here is the way that one individual's being ripples out into others, drawing them from their isolation into something more general. In this vision, individual consciousness is only a portal, an avenue into something limitless and interwoven. Clarissa's offering is to help further this "radiancy" through her parties.

When Michael Cunningham takes up these same themes in *The Hours*, including the oceanic interconnectedness between people, the life of one human spirit animating that of another, the permeable boundaries between life and death, and the burst bounds of time, he allows them to ripple out in wider and wider circles. This echoing and widening pattern also takes up a relatively minor theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*—the sustaining role of literature represented by the repeated dirge from *Cymbeline*—and expands it. Michael Cunningham explicitly situates the role of literature in these moments where death, time, and human isolation are temporarily overcome but are always a necessary, looming shadow.

He knows what readers of Shakespeare know about the repeated lines from *Cymbeline* ("Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages,") that echo in the thoughts of Septimus and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*—that Imogen, over whom they are sung, is only apparently dead. At the end of the play, the audience witnesses her seemingly miraculous return. Similarly, *The Hours* begins with the death of Virginia Woolf, yet it derives its life from the novel that Woolf wrote. More specifically, it derives its life from the soul of Virginia Woolf, whose own act of writing is represented as a descent into her "second self":

If she were religious, she would call it the soul. It is more than the sum of her intellect and her emotions, more than the sum of her experiences, though it runs like veins of brilliant metal through all three. It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance, and when she is very fortunate she is able to write directly through that faculty. (Cunningham 34–35)

This faculty, the soul of Virginia Woolf, “made of the same substance as the animating mysteries of the world,” sustains Laura Brown, however precariously, in one of the darkest periods of her life. Laura is a character in *The Hours* who has no exact counterpart in *Mrs. Dalloway*, except in so far as she is a reader of literature, like Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway, and she is married to a soldier, like Rezia. But Laura does not read Shakespeare; she reads *Mrs. Dalloway*; and as she reads, preferring the book to the life she is leading, she marvels at Woolf’s ability to create such beauty despite the author’s own demons (41). Laura lingers over the lush language of the novel, pausing over one sentence in particular: “For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (Woolf 4, quoted in Cunningham 41).

This is Clarissa Dalloway’s response to life. She loves it, and her expression of that love is to create. As we have seen, Clarissa’s creativity lies in her efforts to bring “radiancy” into the lives of others. Through the medium of literature, Laura is nourished by this fictive woman’s efforts to create a world, as she is, on another ontological level, by Woolf’s. Author and character, in their different ways, are inspired and prompted by “the animating mysteries of the world” (Cunningham 34–35) a disposition to which Laura responds.

Although Laura visits the antechamber of death in the hotel room, nearly taking her own life, reading *Mrs. Dalloway* helps her to overcome despair. Marshalling a measure of the spirit of Clarissa Dalloway, she assumes her part in the ongoing creation of life:

Because the war is over, the world has survived, and we are here, all of us, making homes, having and raising children, creating not just books or paintings but a whole world—a world [. . .] where men who have seen horrors beyond imagining, who have acted bravely and well, come home to lighted windows, to perfume, to plates and napkins. (42)

This passage represents Laura’s thoughts (indirectly narrated), clearly nourished by the novel she is reading, in which the re-creation of life after the devastation of war is a central theme. It is similar to the moment in *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Peter recalls Clarissa’s convictions that the unseen part of us “might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting places after death . . .” (153). Here in Laura’s thoughts, both Clarissa Dalloway and Virginia Woolf live on, continuing the process of re-creation.

Laura’s task is to create a world for her children, and for a soldier who has come home from the war. It is noteworthy that in the earlier novel there are soldiers who

do not survive the war, including Evans and (eventually) Septimus, but in this novel there is a soldier who does survive. For Laura Brown as well as for civilization itself, this is at least a temporary overcoming of death. Part of that regeneration in *The Hours* is Laura's attempt to remake the world for her family, including the son of the soldier who survived, young Richie Brown, who is described as "rescued, resurrected, transported by love" (44). Richie knows as a very young boy that without his mother, "there is no world at all" (192). His mother, invigorated by *Mrs. Dalloway* and perhaps strengthened by a kiss that transcends despair, assists, at least for awhile, in creating it for him.

By the end of the novel, we realize that this child grows up to become another poet and writer, Richard Worthington Brown, who will carry on the legacy of Virginia Woolf. Like Woolf before him, and like his mother Laura, Richard Brown comes to feel the attraction of death, to which he eventually succumbs. But before that moment, he achieves stature as a poet and novelist, his work featuring among others the figure of his mother as well as that of Clarissa, his one-time lover. His painful attachment to both women, always shadowed by the threat of loss, has clearly invested Richard's work with some of its creative power.

"One of these days Mrs. Brown will be caught," Woolf wrote in 1923, describing the longing of the writer to capture in words a single ordinary being. "The capture of Mrs. Brown will be the next chapter in the history of literature, and, let us prophesy again, that chapter will be one of the most important the most illustrious, the most epoch-making of them all" (*Essays* 3:388). By referring to Richard's poetry about his mother, Mrs. Brown, Cunningham is delineating a process of literary generativity. Just as the animating power of an individual's life radiates out to others in a movement suggested by the plunge, so does the animating power of literature, thereby nourishing the creation of more life.

To illustrate and extend this process of re-creation and renewal, *The Hours* must illuminate its intermediary stages. Cunningham achieves this effect by ricocheting back and forth between the story of Woolf's life, the story of Laura Brown, and the story of his Clarissa and Richard Brown, three generations of ripples in the water. One detail from the life of the real Virginia Woolf that he does not include concerns her reference to the experience of writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. While working on the novel, she wrote that she had "*plunged* deep into the richest strata of my mind. I can write & write & write now," she continued, "the happiest feeling in the world" (qtd. in Howard xi, emphasis added). Cunningham leaves out this observation because the point is implicit. This self-renewing cycle associated with the plunge is already present in the past.

It is important to note, however, that death by suicide looms over all three stories delineated in *The Hours*, just as it looms over Clarissa Dalloway's party. One such death is depicted at the beginning of the novel and another punctuates its climax. And yet *The Hours* ends unambiguously in affirmation, when the second Clarissa reflects on her "great good fortune" to be alive, as if at a party that we all leave one by one (226).² For death, too, has an animating power that helps

sustain the connection of others to life. Just as we see this mystery in the effect of Septimus's death on Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we discover something similar at work in the last chapter of *The Hours*, after Richard's suicidal plunge to his death while suffering from AIDS. His death prompts (Cunningham's) Clarissa to ponder the effect of mortality, surrounded as she is at that moment by the abandoned fragments of her party and the flowers that in both novels represent both life and death. She realizes that one day she and the others will vanish to join Richard in the realms of the dead and also that most books will vanish with them. But "there's just this for consolation," she thinks, "an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more" (Cunningham 225).

The way in which individual lives, in life and in death, animate and consecrate the life around them is echoed and reaffirmed in Cunningham's novel through its references to literature. Like Clarissa's life-affirming parties, literature represents "an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 122). And we the readers do not simply observe this process; we experience it. In us, the spirit of the dead writer Woolf and those of her creations, who were sometime readers, live on, sustained by Shakespeare. Joining that company is a new reader, Laura Brown in *The Hours*, who is sustained by Woolf and who nurtures the life of another writer, Richard Brown. Both of those characters clearly represent aspects of Michael Cunningham's tribute to *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as to the influence of his own mother on his work. He is both reader and writer, reflecting and bringing forth the radiance he has himself experienced. In turn, the readers of Michael Cunningham's work are nourished by the writers and readers and characters before us, who pass mysteriously from literature into our lives. And by the novel's transmission into film, those circles can only widen. The screen version of *The Hours* reflects yet another world that was created and animated by the love of life and of art that preceded it, however shadowed by the threat of loss. Just as we see in the novel the permeable membrane that separates life from art, as when the details of the daily lives of the writers enter into the sustaining realm of fiction, so that realm and the life it contains may sustain us. Death both underscores the precious nature of this mysterious process and is overcome in ongoing creation.

The Hours suggests that the possibility of death is for all living beings a mode of transmission of the mystery and beauty of life, a mystery and beauty that in turn nourishes creation, whether of more life or of art. Death, art, and love itself all function as portals to that mysterious realm that can burst the bonds of time, an apprehension of what is most precious in life. Yet glimpses of this mystery are fleeting. Even literature is not always eternal. Cunningham's Clarissa, after all, recognizes that Richard's poetry may die, that only a handful of books are good,

and that few of those survive (Cunningham 225). But even in acknowledging our finitude, Michael Cunningham's work helps to extend the reach of the plunge, as it radiates out toward infinity.³

If we take Cunningham's *The Hours* as one possible model of postmodern art echoing earlier art, what would its components look like? First, this is a movement that defies linearity. Perhaps the idea of rippling outward might also illuminate the way many postmodern works of literature (and film) defy a linear or chronological structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead they spin off stories like ripples in all directions, points of contact and connection as the circle widens. Here is an attempt at dialogue with undetermined others, a dialogue that is carried on in widening circles, ever expanding its reach. This is to extend what Virginia Woolf implied, when she wrote in her diary in 1923 of her novel that she originally called *The Hours*:

I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about The Hours, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the cave shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment.⁴

In including this passage as one of the epigraphs of *The Hours*, Cunningham is signaling the source of his title. He may also be suggesting that a work of art is an offering, an effort at making the caves connect. In the case of a second work of art, these connections are simply extended in wider and wider circles, passing beyond the connected caves of the characters to more connections, this time between characters and readers. Some of those readers, in turn, become writers themselves. What we learn from Cunningham's effort to renew and extend what Woolf had begun (partly in tribute to Shakespeare and others before her) is that postmodern art carries the tradition beyond itself, adding more circles in the water.

Implicit in this process, at least in *The Hours*, is an awareness of the impossibility of reaching perfection or totality, as we see in the passage from Borges that constitutes the other epigraph of the novel:

We'll hunt for a third tiger now, but like the others this one too will be a form of what I dream, a structure of words, and not the flesh and bone tiger that beyond all myths paces the earth. I know these things quite well, yet nonetheless some force keeps driving me in this vague, unreasonable, and ancient quest, and I go on pursuing through the hours another tiger, the beast not found in verse.⁵

We know that for Borges the tiger stood as a symbol of the perfection that the writer is denied, even in dreams (Manguel 12). Yet instead of perfection "some force" drives the artist onward in "this vague, unreasonable, ancient quest," which he continues to pursue "through the hours."

A distinction between Borges and Woolf is worth noting. Borges knew that there would always be a gap between the tiger that is a structure of words and the

flesh-and-blood tiger that paces the earth,⁶ whereas Woolf believed that “[o]ne of these days Mrs. Brown will be caught” (*Essays* 3:388). For Borges, who certainly anticipated postmodern literary forms with his infinite labyrinth of mirrors, the writer’s quest will never entirely be realized.

If *The Hours* and Borges are indications, we must conclude that postmodern art acknowledges its own limitations. Czeslaw Milosz would agree. “It appears,” he wrote,

that we are witnesses to the disintegration of this complex of ideas which bears the name “modernity,” and in this sense the word “postmodernism” is applicable. Poetry has somehow become more humble, perhaps because faith in the timelessness and eternal endurance of the work of art has been weakened, which, of course, was the foundation of disdain for *profanum vulgus*. (378)

Milosz seems to suggest that the apotheosis of art that one finds in modernists such as Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf, as well as its elitism, has been eroded. So, it would appear, has the modernist impulse to start from scratch. “I have to create the whole thing afresh for myself each time,” Woolf wrote. “Probably all writers now are in the same boat. It is the penalty we pay for breaking with tradition, [. . .]” (Quoted in Howard ix).

By contrast, Cunningham’s *The Hours* implies no need to start afresh. Nor is there any suggestion in *The Hours* that “the capture of Mrs. Brown [will] be the most epoch-making of all,” although Cunningham did borrow the name to signal the source of his own inspiration in Woolf, as well as, perhaps, that of the fictional writer Richard Brown in his mother. *The Hours*, however, emphasizes not the Olympian attainments of art but the interconnections, from generation to generation and reader to reader, that art makes possible.

Note also that although Woolf felt the need to “create the whole thing afresh for myself each time,” Clarissa Dalloway felt a similar urge to create the moment. “Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (4). Here Woolf identifies Clarissa as an artist. But in the context of the novel Clarissa’s art seems to consist more in making connections or points of radiancy than in starting over, as if with a blank slate. Perhaps embedded within Woolf’s modernist novel is a gesture in the direction of a humbler postmodern aesthetic impulse.

Yet if the postmodern work of art acknowledges its finitude and its debt to tradition, it nonetheless participates in an infinite movement beyond itself. Part of that movement simply repeats the widening circles that it has discovered and encouraged in the earlier work. Here Borges’s “vague, unreasonable, ancient quest,” this search for the third tiger, is joined to the literary tradition that went before it. Literature, suggests Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, is the pull toward the apocryphal text still to be rediscovered or invented (72, 171, 239, 256).⁷ The future and the past are brought together here in the same limitless impulse.

Perhaps a pull toward the new apocryphal text that is at once rediscovered and invented best describes this particular model of postmodern art re-presenting art. Like the plunge, it suggests a double gesture, probing the depth of rediscovery while moving out from a radiating center. In *The Hours*, Cunningham develops two themes glimpsed in *Mrs. Dalloway*: the power of literature and the power of love, very much including same-sex love, to sustain life and generate more life-sustaining art. We might regard Cunningham's treatment of these themes as a reverent exploration of what is already present in the earlier novel. Yet this is not merely an effort at giving voice to the silences; nor is it simply a matter of drawing on an earlier tradition as newer works of art have done for centuries. The postmodern contribution is not so much an attempt at progression as it is an expansion in all directions. It simultaneously plumbs the depths of the original (the rediscovery, the plunge) and invents a new work, thereby widening the circles. The return to an earlier work is at the same time a gesture toward the future: they are part of one motion.

In some ways, of course, the same impulse characterizes deconstruction. In the words of Derrida:

An inheritance is never gathered together, one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can only consist in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. "One must" means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. [. . .] The injunction itself (it always says "choose and decide from among what you inherit") can only be one by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times—and in several voices. (16, emphasis in original)

In the same passage, Derrida also acknowledges the apocryphal nature of what is being sought, writing that "One always inherits from a secret—which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'"

Despite the challenge of unearthing the hidden, this impulse seems to encourage a new humility on the part of the artist. It acknowledges the finitude of any one attempt at self-expression or any one attempt to characterize or appropriate what a work of art conveys; and in so doing, it paradoxically exposes further depth in the tradition. There is no totality, which is why the urge to re-present persists. Perfection, the "other tiger," is not attainable. Nor is the "central mystery," what Cunningham's character Virginia Woolf calls that "elusive brightness that shines from the edges of certain dreams, the brightness which, when we awaken, is already fading from our minds" (Cunningham 210).

Again, Derrida has made a similar point, asserting: "The critical choice called for by any reaffirmation of the inheritance is also, like memory itself, the condition of finitude. The infinite does not inherit, it does not inherit (from) itself" (16). The artist's very knowledge of finitude encourages an endless dialogue and an infinite process.⁹

If we take *The Hours* as representative of at least one form of postmodern art re-presenting earlier art, then we must consider one final element of this model: the idea that the reader's response (in the case of literature) is fundamental to the infinite process in which art participates. This may seem obvious, but it underscores the point that a work of art is not simply what the artist creates. It is a link in a chain. The artist makes possible new responses to a tradition that he or she brings forth, thereby extending a continuum in both directions beyond the artist and the work. Reading and creation, the tradition and its readership are all a part of the activity of art. A work is not self-contained, nor is the artist a sole creator. Both participate in an ongoing process. If such a work generates another iteration, as is the case with the film version of *The Hours*, this re-presentation only carries the process further.

This motion is what Calvino in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, his book about books, calls "a network of lines that enlase" (132). The model is not Bloom's "anxiety of influence," in which the artist tries to outdo his or her predecessors. And it is certainly not pastiche, the idea of which suggests little of the implied depth and movement of the plunge. That is not to say that there are no instances of postmodern pastiche, only that there is an important and serious alternate model. That model is one of "enlacing," whereby the postmodern work extends the depth of the tradition to unnamed and innumerable others. Far from claiming the triumph of the new (albeit doing so, temporarily but inevitably, at the same time), such a work continues the links begun in the original, links between characters or between characters and readers, some of the latter future writers or artists themselves. Art of this sort awaits further iterations or ripples in the water and reminds us that these are inevitable.

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NOTES

1. One of the most influential early instances of this line of argument is that of Frederic Jameson in "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" first published in Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Albany, CA: Bay P, 1983:114.) or Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92. See, also, Richard Kearney, in *The Wake of Imagination, passim*, and his later and slightly more positive *Poetics of Imagining*, 178-236. An exception to the prevailing tendency to dismiss the value of pastiche can be found in Hoesterey, *passim*. See also Rose 26-38.

2. Daldry's cinematic version of *The Hours* transposes this reflection from its place at the end of the novel to an earlier scene involving Virginia Woolf, not Cunningham's Clarissa, and ends with a repeated scene of Woolf's suicide. Both changes substantially alter the tone of the novel, which continually counters despair and tragedy with the affirmation of life.

3. For informing my treatment of the themes of death and literature I owe a general debt to Miller 79-101.

4. August 30, 1923, cited in the epigraph of *The Hours*.

5. J. L. Borges, "The Other Tiger" 1960, cited in the epigraph of *The Hours*. See also Borges 70-71.

6. As did Richard Brown in *The Hours* (199).

7. The best expression of this idea can be found in Calvino, 72: "Reading," says a professor, "is always this: there is a thing that is there, a thing made of writing, a solid, material object, which cannot be changed, and through this thing we measure ourselves against something else that is not present, something else that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world, because it can only be thought, imagined, or because it was once and is no longer, past, lost, unattainable, in the land of the dead. . . ."

"Or that is not present because it does not yet exist, something desired, feared, possible or impossible," Ludmilla says. "Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be."

8. Derrida's deconstructive effort at opening the tradition does not represent the only movement in contemporary thought that encourages this way of thinking. The recognition that all forms of representation, historical as well as artistic, are versions only, always incomplete, is widespread in both theoretical and literary works of postmodernity. For commentary on this phenomenon, see, for example, Marshall 49–79, Hutcheon, *Politics* 31–92, and *Poetics*, especially 74–101. This critique of representation clearly encourages further re-presentation by underscoring an awareness of the finitude of any single effort. Accordingly, a critique of representation and a renewed effort at re-presentation can coexist in one work.

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