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The Forgotten Beauty of the Feminine: Elena Guro's *The Little Camels of the Sky*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and the Holy Grail of the "Woman's Sentence"

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The Forgotten Beauty of the Feminine: Elena Guro's *The Little Camels of the Sky*,
Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and the Holy Grail of the "Woman's Sentence"

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Bailey M. Orr

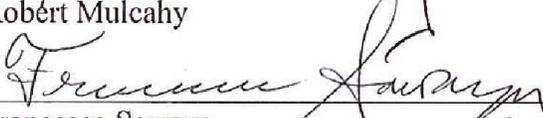
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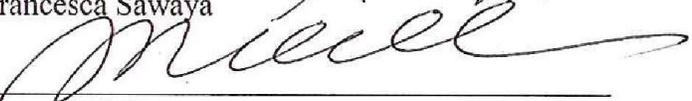
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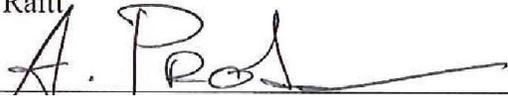
Robert Mulcahy



Francesca Sawaya



Suzanne Raitt



Alexander Prokhorov

Williamsburg, VA
May 4, 2018

“Thus we ourselves create forgotten beauty, and then it pursues us, stings us and demands the warmth it was denied, the light it was driven from ...”¹ (*TLCOTS* 64)

1. Tak sozdaem my sami zabytuiu krasotu, i potom ona goniaetsia za nami, i zhalit nas, i trebuet sebe tepla, v kotorom ei bylo otkazano, sveta, ot kotorogo ee prognali ... (*S* 282)

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List of Abbreviations

AROOO
Russian
S
“Sketch”
TLCOTS
W
WD

A Room of One’s Own
“The Russian Point of View”
Sochineniia
“A Sketch of the Past”
The Little Camels of the Sky
The Waves
A Writer’s Diary

Introduction

“I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on pavement.” (W 176)

“Why don’t I express what makes me grow weak with delight? How can I discover my real, cherished thoughts?”² (TLCOTS 76)

In her seminal 1929 feminist essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf bemoans the lack of a utopian “woman’s sentence” vis-à-vis the “men’s sentence” that has dominated literature and from which no woman writer has successfully managed to free herself. Indeed, the aforementioned quotes illustrate a yearning for a nonexistent, or long-forgotten, language that expresses the linguistically inexpressible. In my thesis, I propose that both the English novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf and the Russian poet and artist Elena Guro establish the optimal creative state as independent of the burden of masculine language. In their respective works *The Waves* (1931) and *The Little Camels of the Sky* (*Nebesnye verbluzhata*) (1914, hereafter referred to as *Little Camels*), Woolf and Guro challenge the authority of the masculine sentence and propose a means of reclaiming language by estranging the linguistic subject, deconstructing feminine archetypes, and ultimately, by anticipating the French feminist idea of *l’écriture féminine*.

Since Woolf never provides us with a definition of a “woman’s sentence,” we need to come to a consensus on what Woolf considers to be a “woman’s sentence,” or, perhaps more pertinently, what she considers a “man’s sentence.” Could, for instance, the “woman’s sentence” be connected to what Formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii terms the Russian futurist “Resurrection of the Word”? Furthermore, if Woolf and Guro indeed

2. “Pochemu vyrazhaiu to, otchego iznyvaiu vostorgom? Kak naiti moia nastoiashchie dorie mysli?” (S 296)

intend to reinvent language via the “woman’s sentence,” then why are many of the feminine figures in both texts— Woolf’s suicidal Rhoda and self-hating Susan, Guro’s Mother Earth—subjected to destruction, while their male counterparts survive and are given the opportunity to thrive? Finally, do Woolf and Guro achieve the “woman’s sentence” in their works, or are both narratives simply a journey—a Grail-like quest—to create the utopian *l’écriture féminine*?³

Biographically, Woolf and Guro serve as useful points of comparison. Both were rare female figures in their respective literary movements British modernism and Russian futurism and were married to their peers in said movements. In 1917, Woolf and her husband Leonard co-founded the Hogarth Press, which published seminal Bloomsbury works, while Guro was married to painter and composer Mikhail Matiushin, with whom she sponsored and co-authored the 1910 Russian futurist almanac *Sadok sudei (A Trap for Judges)*. Moreover, both Woolf and Guro both came from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Adelina Virginia Stephen was born in 1882 to a bourgeois London family. Eleonora Genrikhovna von Notenberg was born in 1877 to a general’s family in the Russian imperial capital of St. Petersburg and enjoyed summer holidays at her family’s

3. The notion of “feminine writing” is not unproblematic. Indeed, the materialist lesbian scholar Monique Wittig criticizes anyone who uses the term as contributing to the harmful, male-created “myth of Woman,” which “enlarges the apparatus under which ‘femininity’ presents itself: that is, Difference, Specificity, Female Body/Nature” (“Point of View” 59-60). At first glance, Guro and Woolf do indeed contribute to this “myth of Woman.” As I explore in Chapter Two, Susan in *The Waves* and the unnamed maternal narrator in *Little Camels* bear close resemblances to feminine archetypes and folk figures, among them the Slavic Baba Yaga and Mother Moist Earth. However, Woolf and Guro construct these archetypes primarily to subvert them, by presenting the Cult of Motherhood as stifling and narcissistic and by subverting the binary that labels women as passive and men as active. Moreover, Woolf and Guro challenge the gender essentialism of *l’écriture féminine* by creating portraits of the androgynous artist.

dacha in Finland. Her relatively affluent background, which stood in stark contrast to that of her more plebian contemporaries Vladimir Maiakovskii and Aleksandr Blok, as well as her gender and her German surname, make her a unique figure in Russian futurism (Markov 14). The strong influence of Austrian, German, and Scandinavian literature, as well as French music, further differentiate her among her Russian peers (Markov 20). However, as my second chapter will attempt to demonstrate, Guro was also indebted to the feminine-dominated myths of Slavic folklore.

Privileged births aside, trauma followed both women writers. Woolf suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her half-brothers (Lee 126, 154), while her struggles with mental illness and eventual suicide have been well-documented. Less evidence surrounds Guro's life, but historians contend that she had a son who died in childhood and whom Guro continued to imagine as being alive (Markov 17). Guro's brief and tragic experience with motherhood haunts *Little Camels*. In one untitled prose piece, she bemoans the death of a son, only to close the sketch with the phrase, "that wasn't my son at all" (*TLCOTS* 33). While Woolf had no children, she and Guro are deeply interested in the concept of motherhood, which I explore in Chapter Two. Lastly, both died relatively young—Guro at the age of 36 from illness and Woolf from suicide at 59.

Russian futurist historian Vladimir Markov considers Guro the preeminent representative of Russian impressionist literature, in that little in the way of plot happens in her texts and the focus is on the individual's state of mind (15). Indeed, *Little Camels* follows no clearly discernible narrative structure and is instead made up of vignettes describing an unnamed narrator's relation to the surrounding environment. She often separates her sketches with dots or original drawings in the margins, as if to emphasize

the fragmentary nature of her works (Markov 17). Despite her apparent lack of characters, most of Guro's later works seem to revolve around the same figure, a lanky, quixotic, youth whom Markov speculates is an imagined adult version of Guro's mysterious son (17). In her 1912 collection *Oseunii son (Autumnal Dream)*, which includes her play of the same name, the character is given the name of Baron Wilhelm Kranz, while in *Little Camels* he appears in the form of the disillusioned youth Vasia, the unnamed masculine narrator who yearns to be a poet, and the titular camel itself. One of the goals of this thesis is to reconsider our notions of revolution in the context of Russian literature. While Guro may not appear as subversive as her louder futurist peers, namely Vladimir Maiakovskii, her commitment to the deconstruction of the masculine point of view and the triumph of the feminine in a patriarchal society is arguably just as, if not more, revolutionary. Ultimately, I intend to celebrate Guro not as a footnote in the history of Russian futurism, but as a critical figure in Russian women's writing.

“[*The Waves*] is my first work in my own style!” Virginia Woolf enthusiastically proclaimed in a 1931 diary entry (WD 172). Instead of following the traditional narrative-driven form of the novel, *The Waves* presents the reader with a “play-poem” composed entirely of monologues delivered by its six characters—Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda—as they pass from childhood to adulthood. My first two chapters focus on how both Woolf and Guro, through their experiments with narrative form, emphasis on rhythm, and use of estrangement, reject plot as an organizational system in favor of a new means of linguistic expression.

Beyond taking a structuralist approach, I explore the influence of folklore and archetypes on Guro and Woolf's texts in Chapter Two, “Mythologizing the Sentence.” I

am particularly interested in representations of femininity and motherhood in the texts. While biological motherhood is treated with ambivalence, if not outright hostility, the concept of an organic, creative feminine force is omnipresent throughout both works. In addition, I focus on the two “heroes” in the texts, Woolf’s Percival and Guro’s titular camel, considering the influence of the Grail myth on British modernism and the enduring Slavic concept of the Holy Fool (*iurodivyi*).

My discussion of archetypes leads me into my final chapter, “Queering the Sentence,” in which I apply the ideas of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous regarding feminine writing, *l’écriture féminine*, to Guro’s and Woolf’s texts. I specifically employ both writers’ concepts of feminine subjectivity and temporality, Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, and Woolf’s own belief in synthesizing the masculine and the feminine mind through literature. Moreover, I return to my earlier analyses of structuralism and archetypes and reconsider them through these feminist lenses. By synthesizing *l’écriture féminine*, archetypal analysis, and structuralism, I will argue that *The Waves* and *Little Camels* can be read as both prototypes and preemptive critiques of Woolf’s “woman’s sentence.”

1. Estranging the Sentence: A Structuralist Reading, from Jakobson to Shklovskii

“To begin with, there is a technical difficulty—so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling—that the very form of the sentence does not fit her [the woman]. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use.” (“Women and Fiction” 115)

“Lord, if only I wouldn’t always busy myself with alien things—scattering someone else’s beautiful words, and with tears of enthusiasm in my eyes! It’s really suicide.”⁴ (*TLCOTS* 76)

What does it mean to write a woman’s sentence? In order to come to a consensus, we must first discuss what a woman’s sentence is not—or, rather, what a woman’s sentence seeks to destroy before it can construct something new. As Woolf tells us in *A Room of One’s Own*, “the woman writer [must] alter the current ‘man’s sentence,’ which is unsuited for women’s use” (115). Why, then, analyze Woolf and Guro through the lens of Russian Formalism, a movement dominated by male poets, like Maiakovskii, and critics, like Shklovskii and Roman Jakobson?

Formalism serves as a useful starting point for feminist analysis if we conceive of woman’s writing as attempting to undo traditional modes of narrative, regardless of the writer’s gender. In his introduction to Shklovskii’s *Theory of Prose*, translator Benjamin Sher wonders if “the real thrust of Shklovskii’s criticism was directed not merely at establishing the autonomy of the artist through his craft but at the *emancipation* of the artist from his historical bondage to extra-literary forces” (xvii, Sher’s emphasis). Hence, if we apply Shklovskii’s theory of prose to Woolf and Guro’s writing, perhaps we can

4. “Bozhe, chtob ne zanimat’sia mne vechno chuzhdym, ne sypat’ chuzhikh krasivykh slov, da eshche so slezami entuziazma v glazakh. Pomogi mne. Ved’ eto samoubiistvo.” (*S* 206)

read these texts not only as exemplars of modernism, but as declarations of feminine independence.

Before considering the gendered implications of this emancipation, I first explore the ways in which *The Waves* and *Little Camels* structurally and linguistically subvert the conventions of the European novel. More specifically, I argue that Woolf and Guro, through their union of rhythm and plot, metaphor and metonymy, dialogue and monologue, and the visual and the textual, unite prosaic and poetic modes of language.

1.1 Play-Poems and Etudes: A Note on the Genre of the Texts

Categorizing *The Waves* and *Little Camels* in terms of genre proves difficult. In her diary entries, Woolf conceived of her successor to *Orlando* (1928), tentatively titled *The Moths*, as “a play-poem” with “some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, etc., all flowing together” (WD 107). She later decided that her work, eventually entitled *The Waves*, would be constructed as “a series of dramatic soliloquies,” emphasizing that “the thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the *rhythm* of the waves. Can they be read consecutively? I know nothing about that” (WD 156, my emphasis). Indeed, from the very beginning Woolf conceived of *The Waves* in fragments, with little attention to the traditional structures of plot and narration. “Every morning I write a little sketch, to amuse myself,” she writes in a 1929 entry about her process, “I am not saying ... that these sketches have any relevance, I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way” (WD 139-40).

Similarly, Guro described her writing as “free rhythms. Prose into verse, verse into prose. Prose that is almost verse ... Sections of story taken as color and leitmotifs

[...] concentration of the story on two or three words” (Banjanin, “Transfer,” 4). While *Little Camels*, with its frequently untitled prose pieces, poems, and illustrations, is undeniably more fragmentary than *The Waves*, which has consistent characters and plot development, these diary entries illustrate common goals. Guro’s desire to concentrate the story on “two or three words” parallels Woolf’s stated intention “to put practically everything in [*The Moths*]: but to saturate” (WD 136).

For all their structural differences, both *The Waves* and *Little Camels* can be described as poetic prose. According to Jakobson, “poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion.” (“What is Poetry” 378). In a letter to her husband, Guro espoused this word-based ideology, explaining her intention as a writer “to speak the words, as if they did not coincide with the meaning, but are provoking certain images” (Banjanin 9).

1.2 Between Character and Caricature: Metaphor, Metonymy, and Leitmotifs

In addition to genre, the characters, or lack thereof, of *The Waves* and *Little Camels*, also resist categorization. Woolf sought to have the characters in *The Waves* “done boldly; almost as caricature” (WD 153). The six c(h)aricatures in *The Waves* are defined through both metaphoric and metonymic means, more specifically by a leitmotif (metaphoric) and a physical action (metonymic). According to Jakobson, metaphor relates two signs through similarity and simultaneity, whereas metonymy relates them through contiguity and cause-and-effect chains (“Two Aspects of Language” 110). Both characterizing methods first appear in the characters’ childhood—that is, the first twenty pages in the novel—and stay with them through adulthood, announcing their spatial (metaphoric) and temporal (metonymic) presence in the story. Bernard’s motif is a ring,

which he sees “hanging above me” as a child (W 4) and then as a symbolic representation of his own adulthood: “So the being grows rings,” he observes, “identity becomes robust” (W 194). Moreover, Bernard is defined by speech, specifically his use of speech to come up with phrases. When they are children, Susan describes Bernard as constantly “making phrases” (W 11), but in his final soliloquy Bernard remarks that he is “done with phrases” due to their insufficient ability to capture the human condition (W 219).

On the other hand, Susan’s major leitmotif is not an image, but a statement, “I hate, I love,” which recurs with variations throughout the novel. After witnessing Jinny kiss Louis as a child, the jealous Susan proclaims, “I love and I hate” (W 9). Later, as an adult in the company of her peers, she says of her feelings, “It is hate, it is love” (W 99). She has two metonymic markers, the senses of sight and touch. She narrates the aforementioned childhood scene in which Jinny kisses Louis with specific emphasis on her sense of sight, saying, “I *saw* her kiss him. I raised my head from my flower-pot and *looked* through a chink in the hedge. I *saw* her kiss him. I *saw* them, Jinny and Louis, kissing” (W 7, my emphasis). Fixated on what has happened, she later continues, “I *saw* her kiss him ... I *looked* between the leaves and *saw* her ... I have *eyes* that *look* close to the ground and *see* insects in the grass” (W 8, my emphasis). Touching and possessing are also metonymic markers of Susan’s character. To return once more to the crucial childhood scene in which Jinny kisses Louis, Susan says, “I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief. It shall be screwed tight into a ball ... I will take my anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees. I will examine it and take it between my fingers” (W 7). As a mother, Susan often speaks about how she will “*possess* more than Jinny, more than Rhoda, by the time I die ... my *hands* are red, my nails bitten” (W 95-6).

Later, in the six characters' reunion scene at Hampton Court, which is the final time we hear from them, save for Bernard, Susan synthesizes her metonymic and metaphoric leitmotifs. "I *grasp*, I *hold* fast," she says, "I *hold* firmly to this *hand*, any one's, with *love*, with *hatred*; it does not matter which" (W 168, my emphasis).

Finally, in the second section Susan briefly takes up a new leitmotif to mark her transformation from girl to woman, as she waits for Percival to come home from India before eventually resigning herself to becoming a mother. She repeats the phrase "Sleep, sleep, I say," with negligible variations while narrating the passage of seasons (W 124-5). Metonymically, the focus is still on hands and possession, but the act of sewing is added, likely to solidify Susan's newfound domestic role, and, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, her full embodiment of the maternal archetype.

Although Jinny serves an object of sexual attraction throughout *The Waves*, it is the movement rather than the appearance of her body that metonymically defines her. She experiences her first sexual awakening after kissing Louis as a child, describing, "I cried as I ran, faster and faster ... I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light." (W 7). She employs a remarkably similar description when describing the sensation of dancing as an adult, equating it to being "out of breath with running ... all is rippling; all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph" (W 31-2). Another leitmotif that signals the appearance of Jinny is the word "come," a fitting representation of her sensuality both semantically and phonetically. This leitmotif makes its first appearance in the novel's transition phase, when Percival has died, the sun begins to sink, and the characters become fully entrenched in their roles, apart from the wayward Rhoda and the dynamic Bernard. Just as Susan's new leitmotif "Sleep, sleep," emerges, she hears the voice of

Jinny, “who cries as the door opens, ‘Come, come!’” (*W* 126) From this point on, “Come, come!” is the phrase uttered by Jinny to signal the introduction of a new sexual conquest. She even compares the phrase to a “love song” and describes it as “running arrows of sensation” (*W* 128). Thus, the phrase fits Jinny’s identity both semantically, due to its associations with sex, and phonetically, because it mirrors the metonymic leitmotif of a running body.

And what of Louis, the boy at the center of the childhood kiss? Like Susan, Louis’ leitmotif is a sensation, that of reducing things to order. Like Bernard, speech serves as Louis’ metonymic marker, but, similarly to Rhoda, it is Louis’ inability to speak properly—that is, in a posh English accent—that announces his presence, and sense of being an outsider, in the story. Although his Australian accent is never depicted, we are constantly reminded of it, from childhood, when Louis first discloses that “my father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent . . . They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent” (*W* 12) to adulthood, when the ambitious Louis complains, “If I speak, imitating their accent, they prick their ears, waiting for me to speak again, in order that they may place me” (*W* 67). His recurring metaphoric leitmotif is a beast with its foot chained, an image that first appears when he is a child (*W* 5). Over time, the leitmotif comes to represent Louis’ sense of restriction as a result of his Australian accent, his love of order and structure, and, more menacingly, his attraction to the fascist paternalism embodied in Percival.

Like Bernard, a physical object, in this case a knife, serves as Neville’s leitmotif. In the first section, Neville wonders, “Where is Bernard? . . . He has my knife . . . the sharp one that cuts the keel” (*W* 11). Later in life, the knife transforms from a concrete object to

an abstract metaphor, which he uses to describe his two great passions, Percival and poetry. Of the former, Neville observes, “Every moment he seems to pump into this room this prickly light, this intensity of being so that things have lost their normal uses—this knife-blade is only a flash of light, not a thing to cut with” (W 86). In describing poetry, he states, “one must be skeptical, but throw caution to the winds ... Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade” (W 145). Like the other characters, his leitmotif also evolves to show changes in his life, most notably following the death of Percival, the object of Neville’s desire. He describes his feelings at the news of Percival’s demise as if a knife were cutting him, stating, “Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh” (W 110).

Finally, Rhoda’s metaphoric leitmotif is the emotive “oh! To whom?” (40), which borrows from Percy Blythe Shelley’s poem “The Question” (Hite xlvi). In terms of metonymy, she, unlike the other characters, is defined by her perceived *absence* of a face and body, as when she proclaims, “I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world” (W 29). Both Rhoda’s metaphoric and metonymic leitmotifs convey the sense of her disembodiment and lack of an identity. For instance, when she gathers lilies and asks “to whom” she shall give them, she is expressing her sense of not having a purpose or destination in life, in the same way that her statement “I have no face” expresses her sense of not being at home in the world. The answers to the question “oh! To whom?” that Rhoda searches for throughout the text also chart her growing suicidal tendencies. After Percival’s death, Rhoda answers the question by throwing a bouquet of violets into the river as an offering to Percival, making him the recipient of her leitmotif. As time passes, however, and she is unable to feel

comfortable in her face/body, she is also unable to find a concrete answer to her question. She says that she “seldom think[s] of Percival now” (W 150) and begins to fantasize about offering herself to the waves as a means of finally answering the question “to whom” (W 151). Thus, Rhoda’s leitmotif announces both her presence in and permanent exit from the text.

At first glance, locating character-specific metaphors in *Little Camels* proves a more difficult task, since, unlike *The Waves*, Guro’s work does not appear to have any fixed characters. She only gives names to three figures, Vasia, Tania, and Sasha, each of whom appear in one piece each. However, I would argue that the defining features of these “characters,” as well as the unnamed mother who narrates most of the work, appear throughout *Little Camels*. For instance, she signals the appearance of young and innocent figures with the images of clouds and camels. In “Spring, Spring!” the narrator describes “how funny the little camel was! He prepared diligently for his exams, and then flunked out because of shyness and eccentricity” (TLCOTS 17). Moreover, Guro often associates specific phrases with certain voices, much like Susan’s “I hate, I love” or Rhoda’s “Oh! To whom?” For instance, in one unnamed vignette a masculine narrator twice asks “Is it my fate? Is it my future?” (TLCOTS 75) and in another unnamed poem a masculine voice proclaims, “Fate, fate, my little fate! / My quiet fate, my quiet one. / What do you hold for me, or I for you?” (TLCOTS 63) While *Little Camels* might not have characters, it connects certain emotions and feelings with certain voices.

Whereas the camel, as well as other young, innocent figures in the text, is metonymically represented by long hair—described as “the down of a sacred sheen” in

the first vignette (*TLCOTS* 13)— older, authoritative figures are distinguished by their “bald spot” (26). Guro introduces and repeats this metonymic unit later in the prose piece “Vasia,” accusing society of “sacrificing [Vasia] to the future bald gentleman with hemorrhoids ... a bald gentleman, resembling you—who’ve lost the very taste and meaning of life” (28). Metaphorically, in contrast to the environmental and animalistic leitmotifs associated with the camel and the maternal figure, the villainous masculine figure makes its presence known through man-made, artificial objects: books. “Vasia” finds its maternal narrator lamenting the fact that “they deceived you, your elders” (*TLCOTS* 26), while in the aforementioned “At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day,” the masculine narrator, another iteration of the Poet c(h)aricature, distances his “real self ... which writes poems they don’t want to print anywhere” from “all the rest” by refusing to be “printed in their magazines” (*TLCOTS* 19). Elsewhere, a dialogue between a mother and her child about Don Quixote ends with the child concluding, “if a book lies, it must be an evil book” (*TLCOTS* 32). Indeed, Guro repeatedly equates publication with acts of violence, against animals, the natural landscape, and the poetic spirit.

1.3 “I am Writing to a Rhythm, Not a Plot”: Sight, Sound, and Polyphony

Why would Guro, a writer herself, express such an aversion to the printed word? We can locate a possible source of this ideology in Russian futurist manifestos. In the manifesto “A Trap for Judges 2” (“Sadok sudei 2”), members of the Hylaea group, including Guro, advocated for the production of “hand-lettered (autographic) books,” believing handwriting to be “a component of the poetic impulse” (Lawton 54). Guro’s

inclusion of original drawings, as well as poetry and prose, emphasize her privileging of the visual in addition to the textual, and her synthesis of the two through poetic language.

Despite not belonging to the Russian futurist school, Woolf was also clearly interested in synthesizing the visual and the textual into her writing. In her memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf equates existence to a painting, writing “one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions” (“Sketch” 73). On the most basic level, this speaks to the influence of visual arts on Woolf’s writing. Her sister, Vanessa Bell, was a painter and designed the covers for all of her novels, while Woolf herself explored the psychology of the woman artist in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In *The Waves*, Rhoda, struggling to describe her surroundings, using similes, resorts to geometric, Cubist language, observing, “There is a square; there is an oblong. The plays take the square and place it in the oblong” (118). In addition to visual art, Woolf was also interested in incorporating music into her text. “Could one not get the waves to be heard all through [the novel]?” she wonders in one diary entry (WD 141).

Woolf’s musings in “A Sketch of the Past”, as well as her interest in the omnipresent sound of the waves, are also significant because they call to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the polyphonic novel. In his work *Problems of Dostoevskii’s Poetics* (1972), Bakhtin lifts the musical term “polyphony” and contextualizes it in literature as “the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” in which “the hero’s word about himself and about the world is every bit as valid as the usual authorial word ... nor does it serve as mouthpiece for the author’s voice” (14). Thus, the author does not directly impose his or her values on the work; rather, the values

of the characters are allowed to exist on their own terms, even if they do not reflect the ideology of their creator. Bakhtin credits the invention of the polyphonic novel to Fedor Dostoevskii, for whom “everything in life is dialogue” (36) and contrasts it with “the established forms of the basically monological (homophonic) European novel” (5).

While *The Waves*, with its inclusion of six voices in constant dialogue and lack of omniscient narrator, at first appears to be an ideal example of the polyphonic novel, this labeling is complicated by the final section, in which the narration suddenly shifts entirely to Bernard’s voice. One might interpret this decision on Woolf’s part as privileging Bernard’s voice over the five others. However, Bernard himself rejects this notion while speaking to an unnamed subject, acknowledging ““in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story—and there are so many, and so many—...and none of them are true”” (W 176). Bernard’s sentiments reflect Bakhtin’s in another one of his essays, “Discourse in the Novel” (1941), in which he argues that pure monologism cannot exist, because “everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (426). One encounters this sense of relinquishing control of one’s thoughts and actions to a greater force in Woolf’s description of her writing process for *The Waves*. “I am not trying to tell a story,” Woolf tells us in a 1929 diary entry, “yet perhaps it might be done in that way” (WD 140, my emphasis). Similarly, she stresses that the childhood scene in *The Waves* “must not be my childhood” (WD 141, Woolf’s emphasis). While Woolf does not reject the idea of *The Waves* becoming a coherent narrative, she separates herself, the “I,” from the process and instead refers to it in the passive voice, as if the voices in her narrative have a life of their own: “perhaps it might

be done in that way.” Dialogism changes one’s reading of another of Woolf’s entry, in which she states her desire to make *The Moths* “an eyeless book” (WD 134). *The Waves* is not only “eyeless” but “I-less,” rejecting a single observation. In one passage, Louis reflects on the inadequacy of “I” in describing a single life, let alone the whole of human existence: “I have signed my name already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands by name. ... Yet a vast inheritance of experience is packed in me” (W 121). Bernard echoes this sentiment in his closing monologue, reflecting on “I, I, I, tired as I am, spent as I am” (W 219-20).

Although Bakhtin was interested in the *ideological* discourses in Dostoevskii’s novels, of how consciousnesses perceive the world around them intellectually, Woolf and Guro are more concerned with *observational* discourses, of how different consciousnesses sense the world around them physically. Take the following scene:

“It is Percival,” said Louis, sitting silent ...

“... It is hate, it is love,” said Susan. “That is the furious coalblack stream” ...

“... It is love,” said Jinny, “it is hate, such as Susan feels for me ...” (W 99)

The three monologues above are linked by syntactic similarity, all beginning with the words “it is.” The last two even contain the same two phrases, “it is hate” and “it is love,” but they are reversed so that “it is love” is repeated, as if Jinny’s “it is love” statement is directly responding to Susan’s “it is love” statement. The interaction between Jinny’s and Susan’s monologues serves a metaphoric function as well. As previously explored, throughout *The Waves* Susan is repeatedly associated with jealousy and possession; she even repeats the phrase “I love and I hate” multiple times, with syntactic variation, but with a particular emphasis on the sentiment of “hate” as opposed to “love.” Jinny, in

contrast, is defined by her desire to be loved, more specifically her body's desire to be admired. Thus, the connection between Susan's "It is hate, it is love" and Jinny's "It is love, it is hate," is both metonymic, bridging the two dramatic monologues through syntactic similarity, and metaphoric, functioning as symbolic representations of the figures who utter them. As Maureen Chun succinctly puts it, "neither the language of the interludes nor the soliloquies can be attributed to an omniscient or private perspective, to an unseen narrator or to an individual character" (54). Later, she points out, "each iteration of 'I' represents an instance of the waves, the shared material origin and consciousness of the characters rather than any unique, subjective voice" (Chun 58). Paradoxically, then, for a work that is almost entirely made up of soliloquies, *The Waves* is governed by Bakhtinian polyphony.

Like Woolf, Guro also sought to synthesize the textual with various other artistic mediums. Visually, her drawings accompany her prose pieces and poetry, sometimes serving as transitions between vignettes. In addition, Guro seems to be inspired by the musical pursuits of her husband, Mikhail Matiushin. Several of the sketches in *Little Camels* bear titles borrowed from music, such as "Adagio" ("Adazhio"), and "Finale" (given in Latin letters in the original version). "Adagio" refers to music that is played slowly, which Guro mimics by sluggishly describing the scene around her: "Two pines on the shore of the dune form a chalice. The sides of the divine golden chalice are formed by the diverging trunks"⁵ (*TLCOTS* 68). Interestingly, however, these titles do not seem

5. Na beregu diuny dve sosny imeiut formu chashi. Boka zolotoi bozheskoi chashi—narisovany ikh raskhodiashchimisia stvolami. (*S* 286)

to correspond to the actual structure of the text; for instance, “Finale” is not the last, or even one of the last, pieces in the work.

Another of Guro’s prose pieces weaves multiple voices together polyphonically, across the boundaries of space and time:

I want him to love me more than his life, and my caress—more than the sun.

I want his soul to burst with tenderness.

But I also want him to answer my affection with the reserve of childish superiority:

“I don’t have time, mommy—my train leaves in half an hour.” And he’d jump into his carriage.

“I don’t have time, my ships have sailed far off,” the young Viking said to his bride, “and the gulls are already flapping after my ships.”

And without kissing her, off he went.

And meanwhile, in the forest, the bearberry’s almond snow fell, and the forest seemed in wedding attire.

I want him often to forget to say hello and goodbye.⁶ (*TLCOTS* 90)

6. Ia khochu, chtob on menia liubil bol’she svoei zhizni, lasku moi—bol’she solntsa.

Ia khochu, chtob dusha ego razryvalas’ ot nezhnosti.

No ia takzhe khochu, chtoby na moi lasku on mne otvetil so sderzhannost’iu detskogo prevoskhodstva:

“Mne nikogda, mamochka, cherez polchasa ukhodit moi poezd.” I prygnul by v brichku.

As in Woolf's text, Guro links different voices, different temporalities, and different sensations with syntactic similarity. "I don't have time" is uttered by two voices in vastly different contexts, one a modern boy speaking to his mother, the other a Viking conversing with his bride. Even the forest's experience is privileged as much as that of its human counterparts. Indeed, Guro equalizes the experience of the forest and that of the Viking bride by including nuptial imagery in her brief descriptions of both subjects.

Thus, Woolf and Guro further destroy the boundaries between prose and poetry by synthesizing the visual and the textual, the metaphoric and the metonymic modes of utterance, and the monological and the dialogical. Woolf links together soliloquies in such a way that she conflates monological and dialogical, and metaphoric and metonymic, discourses, while Guro unites various voices across time and space by their common sensations of the world around them.

1.4 Toward a Trans-Sense Language: Personification and the Child's Point of View

That Guro and Woolf privilege sensation over ideology does not mean that their texts are devoid of ideology. Rather, their emphasis on sensation is precisely what informs their ideology as writers. One untitled prose piece in *Little Camels* reads like an artistic manifesto:

Mne nikogda, otplyli moi korabli dalechko, skazal molodoi Viking svoei neveste, —i uzhe mashut chaiki vsled moim korabliam.

I on, ne potselovav ee, umchalsia. A v lesu vypal mezh tem mindal'nyi sneg tolokniarki, i les byl, kak v venchal'nom ubore.

Ia khochu, chtob on chasto zabyval zdorovat'sia i proshchat'sia. (S 320)

I want to depict the head of a white mushroom to look wise and pure, the way it came out of the earth, having seized for itself a part of the planetary strength. To depict the walls and roof of a Finnish villa the way they appeared from the wooded hill, washed with distance and level with the clouds.

A cloud above the hill, the way it became after swimming across the bright sphere of sky.

The brows of beasts, lit by a tiny white star—as the living Goodness of breathing made them.

And my son as he began to resemble a willow with his tall bending trunk, with the little lock overhanging his brow—and a birch. And with his bright eyes—a young larch, thrusting its tip into the sky.⁷ (97)

This desire to describe surroundings as if experiencing it for the first time illustrates Russian formalist Viktor Shklovskii's concept of *ostranenie* or estrangement. In his influential 1917 essay “Art as Device” (“Isskustvo kak priem”), Shklovskii differentiates

7. Ia khochu izobrazit' golovu belogo griba umnoi i chistoi, kakoi ona vyshla iz zemli, zakhvativ s soboiu chast' planetnoi sily. Steny i kryshu finskoi villy, kakimi oni vyglianuli iz lesnoi gory, omytye udalennost'iu na vysote k oblakam.

Oblako nad goroi. Kakim ono stalo, pereplyv svetluiu nebesnuiu sferu.

Lby zveri, osveshchennye beloii zvezdochkoi, kak ikh sozdalo zhivoe Dobro dykhaniia.

I moego syna, s tekh por, kak on stal pokhozh na ivu dlinnym sognutym stanom, a ponikshei milo priadkoi volos na lbu — na berezu, a svetlymi glazami — na moloduiu listvennitsu, vonzivshchuiusia vershinoi v nebo. (S 317)

between an algebraic, everyday way of perceiving the world around us, wherein “objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye” (5) and an artistic way of creating a work “so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception” (19). Shklovskii describes the former process as atomization and the latter as *ostranenie*, estrangement. When estrangement is used to describe a familiar object that one sees every day, the reader approaches the object as if seeing it, touching it, or hearing it for the first time, and thus takes longer to perceive it. For Shklovskii, art exists for precisely this reason, “in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony” (“Art as Device” 6). Put even more succinctly, “art is a means of experiencing the *process* of creativity” (“Art as Device,” 6, my emphasis). This technique was especially prominent among Russian futurists like Elena Guro. The “language of the futurists,” Shklovskii writes in his essay “The Resurrection of the Word,” seeks “the return to man of sensation of the world” (41).

One of the specific examples of estrangement Shklovskii includes in his essay is a passage from Tolstoi’s short story “Kholstomer,” in which the institution of property is described from the point of view of a horse (“Art as Device” 7). Similarly, Guro’s favored means of estrangement is narration through the eyes and ears of children. According to Markov, “children are not only able to see things as if for the first time, but to hear words in their original freshness” (16). In the poem “Words of Love and Warmth” (“Slova liubvi i tepla”) from *Little Camels*, Guro describes the image of a cat from a childlike perspective, with an emphasis on phonetics and the sensation of sound:

Once upon a time there was

Purly

Bootie—tummy

Dopey

Kitty—fluffy	Vorkotik
Feathery	Duratik
Whitely	Kotik—pushatik
Kit-catty	Pushonchik
Tussely. (Kalina-Levine 36-7)	Belovatik,
Zhil byl	Koshuratik
Botik—zhivotik	Potasik. (<i>S</i> 317-8)

Guro's use of Russian diminutives, characterized by the -ik suffix, not only create a simple rhyming scheme but also echo the way children talk. As for the cat itself, she estranges it by emphasizing its sensory power. Rather than simply writing, "there was a cat," the child perceives something "fluffy" and "featherly," that is, soft to the touch, and it is through this sensation that the object becomes "kit-catty." Thus, Guro estranges the cat by presenting it not as a cat but as a series of metaphoric and metonymic associations that a child would make. In "Two Aspects of Language," Jakobson outlines a psychological test in which children are given a stimulus and asked to respond with the first verbal expression they can think of (110). When confronted by the visual rendering of a cat's paw, a child might make a metonymic connection between a boot and a foot, and thus answer "boot."

Most prominently, Guro estranges the human subject by personifying animals and inanimate objects. The title itself, *Little Camels*, is an example of a kind of double estrangement because it simultaneously refers to an idealistic young boy, a camel, and a cloud. In the prose piece "Sundream" ("Solnechnyi son"), she addresses "my lovely cloud... my lovely caressing cloud... my little white calf of the sky... dreamy with a

dream of sky...” (*TLCOTS* 45). In the same sketch, she describes the movement of the clouds as “tender, curly white creatures ... sail[ing] from the south and melt[ing] into the upper air’s blue beverage” (*TLCOTS* 45). Even more jarring for the reader, Guro juxtaposes her personification of inanimate objects and non-human organisms with the relatively simple, mechanical actions of her human characters. For instance, in the vignette “At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day” (“U peschanogo burga v goluboi den”), an unnamed, masculine narrator, relates how “my hand lifted a stone and hurled it... spiraling, it traced an arc above the edge of the forest, in the blue land” (*TLCOTS* 19). He then considers, “All [the rock’s] life it was on earth, and suddenly my hand gave it flight... Did it feel bliss, flying through the blue?” (*TLCOTS* 19) Crucially, Guro emphasizes that the “hand” of the speaker “lifted [the] stone” and “gave it flight,” not the speaker himself. The metonymic representation of the human character—the hand—possesses verbal agency, while the inanimate object has the emotional agency to “feel bliss.” On the other hand, the human figure is rendered wholly passive, deprived of physical movement and complex thought.

In contrast, the prose piece “Patches of Thawed Sky” (“Nebesnye protaliny”) finds Guro inverting the interactions between physical and emotional agency and inanimate objects and human bodily attributes:

When a young man goes to meet the north, the wind beats his brow, his high pure brow, not yet knowing fear.

Hair streaming like a horse’s forelock. And horse-like mettle toward what’s ahead—while ahead lie...lakes...lakes.

Somewhere a little porch was thawing then, and a larch stretched, fir-like, over it.
And the larch breathed.⁸ (*Camels* 14)

Here, the non-human objects perform the most complex verbal acts. The wind “beats [the man’s] brow,” and a larch “stretche[s]” and then “breathes.” Likewise, metonymic representations of the young man are endowed with the most complex human emotions. Guro describes the youth’s *brow* as “high” and “pure ... not yet knowing fear.” Similarly, what we can only guess to be the man’s hair is equated to “a horse’s forelock” and possesses “horse-like mettle.” In both passages, however, the actual human subject lacks complexity in his physical movement and emotional state of mind. While the Russian language is distinguished from English by its plethora of verbs of motion, allowing the speaker to specify aspects of travel such as destination, duration, and mode of transportation, Guro uses the vaguest verb possible, the prefix-less *idet*, translated by O’Brien as “goes.”

In *The Waves*, Shklovskii’s theory of estrangement is most prevalent in the interludes, which serve as pauses between the characters’ monologues. The very first interlude in the work opens with the sunrise described in terms of geometric shapes and

8. Kogda idet navstrechu severu iunosha, ego priamo v lob b’et veter, v otkryti chisty lob, ne umeiushchii ehsche boiat’sia.

Razletaiutsia volosy konskoi chelkoi. I loshadinaia pryt’ k tomu, chto vpered, — a vpered — ozera, —ozera.

Gde-nibud’ i krylechko, v tu poru taialo, a nad nim listvennitsa prosterlas’ elochkoi. I listvennitsa dyshala. (*S* 220)

abstractions, such as a “dark line” or “thick strokes moving.” The emphasis is not on the sunrise itself, but the viewer’s perception of the sunrise. Similarly, as previously discussed, the characters are metonymically identified not by body parts but by the functions of those body parts, like Susan’s act of seeing as opposed to her eyes themselves and Jinny’s act of movement as opposed to her body itself. The estrangement in this opening interlude carries through to the opening monologues, in which the characters describe natural objects as if seeing them for the first time:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.”

“I see a crimson tassel,” said Jinny, “twisted with gold threads.”

“I hear something stamping,” said Louis. “A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.”

“Look at the spider’s web on the corner of the balcony, said Bernard. It has beads of water on it, drops of white light.” (W 4)

Just as the emphasis in the preceding interlude is on the slow perception of the sunrise, rather than the sunrise itself, so the ways in which the characters perceive their surrounding environment dictate their present and future characterization more than the things themselves they are perceiving. Rhoda’s and Louis’ act of hearing, rather than

seeing, instantly mark them as outsiders from the rest of the group, who sense with their eyes. Jinny's description of the crimson tassel "*twisted* with gold threads" (my emphasis) foreshadows the eroticism of her "twisted" body movements while dancing. Bernard and Neville both perceive the ring and globe, respectively, as "hanging," but Bernard describes it as "quivering," which anticipates constant questioning of, and eventual dissatisfaction with, language.

Like Guro, Woolf uses the child's point of view in order to come close to the sensation of "the word as such." An early passage finds the six characters quite literally estranging language:

"Those are white words," said Susan, "like stones one picks up by the seashore."

"They flick their tails right and left as I speak them," said Bernard. "They wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving altogether, now dividing, now coming together."

"Those are yellow words, those are fiery words," said Jinny. "I should like a fiery dress, a yellow dress, a fulvous dress to wear in the evening."

"Each tense," said Neville, "means differently. There is an order in this world, upon whose verge I step. For this is only a beginning." (W 12-3)

This passage serves as a visualization of the signifying process. According to Julia Kristeva, there are two major modes in linguistics: the semiotic, in which words do not yet have denotative meaning, and the symbolic, in which signification has taken place and there is an arbitrary connection between a word and its meaning. She borrows from Plato the term *chora*, which denotes "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stasis" ("Revolution," 93).

The *chora* is part of the semiotic, in that it “precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality,” all of which come into being in the symbolic (“Revolution,” 94).

Bernard’s description of how words “move through the air flocks, now this way, now that way, moving altogether” serves as a visualization of language in the *chora* stage; the words do not yet have symbolic meaning, they are merely mobile. Susan and Jinny, however, make the mental leap from semiotic to symbolic by giving meaning to words: “white” to signify the color of the “stones,” “yellow” to signify the color of the “dress.” Thus, by employing the child’s point of view, Woolf and Guro “disturb the abstractions of signification, by renewing a sense of words as things” (Chun 55).

1.5 Conclusions

In their respective works, Guro and Woolf estrange the human subject and its accompanying emotions by identifying characters with metaphoric and metonymic leitmotifs, utilizing the child’s point of view, and synthesizing the visual and textual. Woolf connects her characters’ soliloquies in *The Waves* syntactically, rather than thematically; at the same time, however, the soliloquies have a metaphoric—that is, a-temporal, simultaneous—connection. In this sense, *The Waves* is truly poetic prose, combining both metaphor, which makes language poetic, and metonymy, which is the dominant linguistic mode in prose. By contrast, in *Little Camels*, Guro estranges language by estranging the human subject, transferring complex verbal action and emotions to both metonymic and metaphorical representations of that human character. The recurring youth is metonymically linked with long hair, and metaphorically with clouds and camels, the villainous elder with bald spots and the printing press.

While this subversion of language is the foundational theory for modernism, I would argue that Woolf and Guro, as women writers, have a more gendered goal in mind in their conception of a new language. By presenting language as estranged and new, they are asking us to question the nature of reality and the monologic self that has been constructed by European men. To return to Jakobson, he contends that poeticity is important because it shows “an awareness of the inadequacy of that identity [that the sign is the same thing as the object]” (“What is Poetry” 378). Women certainly know about lacking the sufficient language to express themselves. As Woolf puts it in *A Room of One's Own*, “the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room” (64). My next chapter, which focuses on subversions of archetypes and the mythological image of the feminine as lover, mother, and earth, will explore the gendered implications of this desire for a “woman’s sentence.”

2. Mythologizing the Sentence: The Fall of the Hero and the Failure of the Mother

“I detest the masculine point of view. I am bored by his heroism, virtue, and honour. I think the best these men can do is not talk about themselves anymore.” (Lee 601)

“Why must a woman not be many-faced, a nun, she has such bright abysses between her sex and life—when she is childless, or when [her] children have become big and swum away”- Elena Guro, from her diary (Stepanian-Apkarian 399)

If my previous chapter sheds light on Woolf and Guro’s frustration with the *structure* of the man’s sentence, “too loose, too heavy, too pompous” (Woolf, “Women and Fiction” 48), then this chapter seeks to expose their frustration with the *values* of that sentence. In her essay “Women and Fiction” (1928), Woolf observes that “when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important” (49). To come to a consensus on which values women writers like Woolf wish to subvert, one must move past the revolutionary structuralist aspects of Russian futurism and Western modernism and consider the patriarchal thematic tropes both movements borrowed from mythology and folklore and sought to uphold.

In both *The Waves* and *Little Camels*, I argue that Woolf and Guro appropriate traditional archetypes associated with masculinity and femininity. However, unlike their Bloomsbury and futurist peers, Woolf and Guro challenge the legitimacy of these myths rather than idealize them as models for the modern world. Firstly, they deconstruct the masculine folk hero by posing their male pseudo-protagonists, Woolf’s Percival and Guro’s “camel,” as mere muses for feminine creativity. Secondly, they emphasize the omnipotence of the maternal figure vis-a-vis the disillusioned, violated male child. Whereas Woolf locates the inadequacy of both feminine and masculine archetypes by

depicting the aimlessness and despair of her characters, Guro seems to worship primordial concepts of the feminine. Ultimately, however, both writers stress the inadequacy of the masculine point of view and an apprehension about motherhood.

2.1 The 20th Century Quest for the Holy Grail: Modernism, Futurism, and Myth

For all their romanticizing of progress and revolution, modernist literary movements are indebted to folk culture and long-standing patriarchal traditions. In her book *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse*, Jane Goldman ponders whether modern texts “break entirely from ancient ones, or merely remake them anew” (175). She specifically locates a “gender divide” within Woolf and fellow modernist T.S. Eliot, whereby “Woolf’s interest in pinpointing December 1910 as an historical moment of cultural and political change is in direct opposition to Eliot’s notions of tradition and myth, which insist on an eternal, unifying order beyond and outside history” (Goldman 160). Later, she explains how “this male modernist view perpetuates a misogynist French symbolist tradition that transferred Romantic visions of a feminized Nature to equally disturbing Decadent visions of the City as a woman” (168). In other words, male modernists do not seek to dismantle male-female binaries; they merely transfer the “feminine” from the natural, organic world to the city. Per the title of my thesis, I am most interested in the concept of the Holy Grail, a myth most notably explored by T.S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land* (1922) and German Romantic composer Richard Wagner in his opera *Parsifal* (1882).

The Russian Avant-Garde, too, betrays a desire to return to old values. In fact, one of the most critical points of contention between Russian futurists and their Italian counterparts was Russian artist and writers’ distrust of technology and urbanization and

fascination with primitivism.⁹ The very name of the cubo-futurist group Hylaea, of which Maiakovskii and Velimir Khlebnikov were members, references the ancient land where Hercules performed his labors (12). Guro, however, disliked the classical connotations of the name so much that the group was not identified in its second major publication *Sadok sudei 2* (Markov 50). In his study of Russian cubo-futurism, Barooshian argues that the Russian Futurists, “like their Western counterparts – Yeats, Pound, Eliot” conceived of art as “a kind of temple in which these poets rediscovered and recreated the values of the past which they believed would reappear in the future, and which they opposed to a chaotic reality” (109). Thus, while the futurists and modernists alike sought to dismantle the status-quo, they wanted to do so to recreate the values of a primitive utopia.

In *The Waves*, Woolf turns her modernist peers and their Grail-like quest for literary greatness into caricatures. What I intend to suggest with this biographical background is that *The Waves*, by situating actual Bloomsbury members in its characters, and, most importantly, by naming its “hero” Percival, can be read as a commentary on and perhaps a critique of modernism’s values, particularly its Grail-like quest for human progress and order. Even more contentiously, as we shall see, Woolf could be criticizing the fascist tendencies of modernism.¹⁰ Thus, her text can be read as a kind of roman à clef

9. Fascinatingly, primitivism also serves as a meeting point between Russian futurism and British modernism, though it was used differently in each national tradition. Among the futurists, children were seen as ideal artists due to their unpredictable nature and rejection of temporality (Molok 57). In the British context, Protopova defines primitivism as “an umbrella term covering all types of the West’s cultural opposites: it also stood for so called ‘low’ art, ‘the latter including the folk or “popular arts” of any culture” (87). British modernists like Roger Fry and Woolf herself were particularly interested in the Ballets Russes, though perhaps more from an aesthetic rather than ideological angle.

10. Travis argues that modernists such as Eliot and Pound “contributed to a way of thinking and feeling, a collection of cultural habits that provided fertile ground for fascist

of modernist figures. For instance, scholars and acquaintances, including her husband Leonard, have identified literary critic Desmond MacCarthy as a biographical basis for Bernard. A founding member of the Bloomsbury group, MacCarthy, like Bernard, never wrote original works despite his lifelong desire to do so, and in a diary entry, Woolf extolled MacCarthy as “the most gifted of us all” and compared him, fittingly, to “a wave that never breaks, but lollops one this way & that way” (Hite 1). Elsewhere, scholar Julia Briggs locates features of the American T.S. Eliot in the Australian Louis, both of whom come from Anglophone countries. Finally, Molly Hite, in her introduction to *The Waves*, draws a parallel between writer Lytton Strachey’s “precision, physical fragility, homosexuality, and caustic wit” and Neville’s character (li). Bonnie Kime Scott takes a more critical approach, suspecting a “jab” at Ezra Pound’s imagist theory in Neville’s character (27).

Guro also embeds allusions to real-life futurist figure in *Little Camels*, though to a lesser discernible extent. One sketch centers on “the poet, creator of worlds,” which translator Kevin O’Brien describes as a reference to Khlebnikov (*Camels* 89). Elsewhere, Markov believes that the anti-establishment rhetoric in Guro’s work is merely a result of her rejection from the Symbolist movement (19).

2.2 *The Waves* and *Little Camels* as Epics: Chronotope and Monologism

In addition to their caricatures, Guro and Woolf appropriate the epic in the structure of their works. Firstly, while I referred to *The Waves* as a polyphonic novel in my first chapter, both Woolf’s work and Guro’s contain significant structural similarities

tendencies to take root” and that Woolf “tried to warn her readers” of this tendency, most notably in her feminist anti-fascist essay *Three Guineas* (177).

to the monological epic. Kristeva tells us that in the epic, as opposed to the dialogical novel, “[the addressee] is an extra-textual, absolute entity ... that relativizes dialogue to the point where it is cancelled out and reduced to monologue” (“Word” 57). In both *The Waves* and *Little Camels*, the speakers enact “dialogue” without any discernible audience. Woolf’s novel consists entirely of phrases like “Bernard said,” “Jinny said,” “Susan said,” etc., but an addressee is never identified. Likewise, Guro often foregoes proper names for the vague “you;” one unnamed poetry piece consists entirely of a dialogue between “him” (*on*) and a “chorus” (*chor*) (S 258).

Secondly, in place of fixed settings, both *The Waves* and *Little Camels* make ample use of what Bakhtin terms the idyllic chronotope. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin emphasized the interconnectedness between space and time in textual works, terming this dual representation chronotope, literally “time space” (“Forms of Time” 84). He then analyzes various recurring chronotopes from myth and the contemporary novel. The idyllic chronotope serves as a link between these two kinds of text because it “restores the ancient complex and ... folkloric time” (“Forms of Time” 224). Its aspects include unity of place, in which recurring buildings, trees, bodies of water, and other structures follow an individual from the cradle to the grave, a limitation of the temporal narrative to life’s major, abstract events like birth, love, marriage, work, and death, and finally “a conjoining of human life with the life of nature, the unity of their rhythm, the common language used to describe phenomena of nature and the events of human life” (“Forms of Time” 225-6).

The idyllic chronotope appears clearly in *The Waves*’ italicized interludes, which conjoin the human and natural world by juxtaposing the rising and setting of the sun with

the life cycle of its characters. When the sun just rises, Woolf portrays the six voices' childhood experiences, and as it continues to rise she describes their experiences at boarding school, their academic endeavors, and Bernard's marriage. Upon Percival's death, however, the sun begins to fall in the sky, until it has set entirely with the aged Bernard's closing monologue. Moreover, just as the idyll privileges major events like birth, life, and death equally with more banal actions like eating and drinking, so *The Waves* checks in on its six characters at unfixed, seemingly insignificant moments in their life. For instances, rather than depict the birth of her children, the narration focuses on Susan sewing or cultivating her garden. Elsewhere, Bernard conflates life with death in the same sentence, declaring "My son is born; Percival is dead" (W 110). In the six friends' (anti)climactic reunion scene at Hampton Court, Bernard reflects on the cyclical nature of "marriage, death, travel, friendship . . . town, and country; children and all that," juxtaposing it with the stillness and stability of a "many-faceted flower." While "one life" blazes and then goes out, the "yew trees" remain (W 168).

Guro's vignette "Vasia" charts the imagined future life of the titular character from a mother's perspective. She laments that the twelve-year-old boy will not experience an idyllic future with the same natural comforts "a field, a meadow, the sun, a stream and a boat" (26). Instead, she imagines that "year after year" he will be "deprived . . . of spring" until he is eventually sent to military school (27). Later, as an adult, the mother continues, Vasia will fall into unrequited love with a young girl. She encourages Vasia to "love That girl, the Sun, the meadow, the stream," but knows that his job as a civil servant has changed him (28). The piece ends with Guro critiquing her "comrades," which might be interpreted as her futurist peers, and their endless search for progress in

the form of “periodic rewards, career advances” (*Camels* 29). Whereas the futurists sought to integrate the artist into society so that he may enact social change (Barooshian 113), Guro rejects this notion entirely and celebrates the isolation of the artist from modern life. If the recurring meadow, stream, and sun represent an idyllic chronotope, then the cycle of “periodic rewards,” “career advances” and “colleagues” represents a kind of twisted idyllic chronotope, one in which the human and natural world are not conflated but divorced from one another.

The significance of Guro and Woolf’s attachment to chronotopes is twofold. On the one hand, they speak to the influence of myth and folklore on their writing, further positioning the works as modernist texts. On the other hand, the focus on rhythm, on the fixed connection between space and time, and the conflation of the human and natural world negates the modernist and futurist notions of progress, of the ability of humanity through sheer will to attain any goal. In both *The Waves* and *Little Camels*, nature moves cyclically and independently of human action and, as the next two sections show, the human heroes have no choice but to follow suit.

2.3 Castrating Language: The Death of the Poet-Hero

Epics, of course, need heroes. Although *The Waves* contains six voices, there is a seventh, unseen character who serves as the archetypal heroic figure in the novel. Percival, who shares a name with the Arthurian knight first tasked with finding the Holy Grail, makes his first appearance in the novel after the second italicized interlude, when the characters venture out from their primordial, idyllic childhood to begin their secondary school education. He quickly becomes an object of artistic inspiration for the

three male characters, as well as the object of Neville's homosexual desire, and it is through Neville's worshipping, masochistic monologue that we first hear his name:

Now I will lean sideways as if to scratch my thigh. So I shall see Percival. ... His blue, and oddly inexpressive eyes, are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite. He would make an admirable churchwarden. He should have a birch and beat little boys for misdemeanours. He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses. He sees nothing; hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look—he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. (W 24)

While Woolf might have intended for all her characters to be “drawn boldly, as if as caricatures,” Percival is the purest caricature of them all. Neville refers to him as “inexpressive,” “indifferent,” and “remote,” and repeatedly equates him with the oppressive, patriarchal nature of religion, be it in the form of a “pagan” god or “an admirable churchwarden” who beats children. Most interesting is Neville's characterization of Percival as “allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses,” which perhaps serves as a caricature of the man's sentence itself, something rigid, oppressive, and out of place in the modern world.¹¹

In addition to religion, Percival is associated with another oppressive patriarchal institution: imperialism. The fourth italicized interlude in *The Waves* is followed by a

11. Percival's connection with language is not limited to this passage. Louis, also at this point an aspiring poet, declares “it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry” (W 27). Ironically, Neville later tells us that Percival himself “cannot read” (W 33). Although he does not elaborate on this point, the statement is likely a hyperbolic reflection on Percival's absence of analytical thought and poetic creativity. For Woolf, this is a direct result of his rigid masculinity.

farewell dinner for Percival, who is going to India on an unspecified colonization mission. Bernard makes Percival's presence known by ambivalently referring to him as a hero:

“Here is Percival,” said Bernard, “smoothing his hair, not from vanity (he does not look in the glass), but to propitiate the god of decency. He is conventional; he is a hero. ... Now, when he is about to leave us, to go to India, all these trifles come together. He is a hero. Oh, yes, that is not to be denied, and when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves, the occasion is crowned.” (W 89)

The juxtaposition of two seemingly paradoxical characteristics, “conventional” and “heroic,” exposes the inherently conservative nature of the literary hero. Moreover, the passage confirms Percival's heterosexuality. However, in contrast with Neville's queer desire for Percival, which is described at length and repeatedly associated with poetic creativity, Percival's love for Susan does nothing except to confirm his image as a conventional heroic figure. Thus, Woolf emasculates her heterosexual mythic hero by having the reader view him primarily through the eyes of the homosexual Neville and the androgynous Bernard. Later in the section, Bernard contemplates how Percival, by “applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him,” will ensure that “the Oriental problem is solved” (W 98). Woolf's constant conflating of violence and “language” again situates the man's sentence as a product of oppression, proliferated through patriarchy, militarism, heterosexuality, and religion.

In addition to the “India question,” some scholars, such as Briggs and Jessica Berman, regard Percival's character as a response to the rise of British Fascism. For instance, Berman describes *The Waves* as being about “the limitations of both charismatic

leaders and their followers” (115). If Percival is the charismatic Mosley-esque leader, then the six characters in *The Waves* are his naive followers, perhaps no one more so than Louis, who throughout the novel displays fascist proclivities. While at school with Bernard, Neville, and Percival, for instance, he observes the “orderly, processional” way in which they march into the chapel, remarking, “I like the orderly progress” (W 3). Further, he is enraptured with Percival and his loyal followers of “boasting boys” who “salute simultaneously passing the figure of their general,” marveling, “how majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience!” (W 32) This attraction to social stratification and order continues into Louis’ adulthood, as he states in a later section that “journeys should have an end in view; they should earn their two pound ten a week at the command of an august master” (W 122). Louis’ use of the word “master” conjures his leitmotif of “a chained beast stamping” (W 41), which, if at first taken solely to represent his sense of alienation and restriction as an Australian now reads as a masochistic desire for fascist subordination.

One cannot analyze the character of Percival without recognizing the inspiration of Richard Wagner and his opera *Parsifal* on *The Waves*.¹² Wagner haunts the novel from its very first pages, when Bernard observes, “I see a ring ... hanging above me” (4). The ring imagery in the novel evokes Wagner’s famous *Ring* cycle (1869-76). Other characters adopt this imagery as well, particularly when they are attempting to write. Louis likens his effort to compose poetry to forging “a ring of steel” (W 119), and

12. Julia Briggs notes that *Parsifal* “is the story of a patriarchal society, an exclusively male order of knights, reinforced by ties of religion and militarism, and threatened by distracting or even contaminating women. Percival [in *The Waves*] inherits these values, yet stands at the centre of a book whose title promises flux and female rhythms” (253).

Bernard's thoughts coalesce in the form of "a smoke ring" (W 221). Thus, in drawing parallels between Wagnerian rings and writing, Woolf equates a stable, mythic symbol with the stable, mythic man's sentence. However, when Percival dies, Rhoda, declares, "the circle is destroyed" (W 274). With the death of the mythic hero in the modern world, the man's sentence he represents is also destroyed. Similarly, Bernard declares, "this then is the world that Percival sees no longer" (W 110), as if to highlight the inadequacy of Percival's patriarchal view of the world. The point is further articulated in Bernard's closing monologue, in which he declares, "there should be music. Not that wild hunting-song, Percival's music; but a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, peeling song" (W 185). Thus, by critiquing Percival and the values he represents—religion, imperialism, and heterosexuality—Woolf is critiquing the values of the current man's sentence.

In addition to possessing the three qualities Woolf so despises—heroism, virtue, and honor—Percival is also associated with idiocy. Neville himself tells us that Percival "cannot read" and wonders if he could "suffer his stupidity" (W 33). In her introduction to *The Waves*, Molly Hite notes that Percival is known as the Fool in the Grail legend, and he also plays a part in Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* as "the knight whose question, had he asked it, could have cured the Fisher King" (lix). If Woolf's Holy Fool is meant to be derided for his patriarchal view of the world, however, Guro's Holy Fool is an object of pity, a victim of elitist, industrialized modern life. While Guro is not nearly as pointed in her political critiques as Woolf, the writers have a common aversion to social stratification and paternalism. For instance, in the vignette "Vasia," Guro chastises "your elders" ("tvoi otsy"), directly accusing them of caring "only about old men like

yourselves” and robbing young men of their “purity, integrity and capacity for real creativity” (26).

Like Woolf, Guro also feminizes her heroes. For instance, she refers to the titular “Vasia” by his diminutive, which has a feminine ending to it (Vasia) as opposed to the given name, Vasilii, which has a masculine ending. Her Holy Fool is further emasculated by his romantic failures, though they are only briefly touched upon in *Little Camels*. The prose piece “June” (“Iun”) finds “a very shy eccentric” who, upon seeing “an astonishingly bright strip in the sky” is compelled to “go barefoot through nettles for it,” while a vague “she” regards his behavior as “absurd and shameful” and leaves him for it (*TLCOTS* 62). Most importantly, Guro feminizes her hero by making him dependent on Mother Earth. This dependency stems from the Slavic epic tradition, in which the hero, Ivan the Fool (*Ivan durak*), “lowly by birth and humble in demeanor, triumphs over his brothers through his dependency on the mother” (Hubbs 146) and later, the concept of the anti-tsarist¹³ Holy Fool (*iurodivyi*). According to Hubbs, he serves “a permanent injunction against patriarchal vanity” because he derives power from and serves Mother Earth by performing tasks not considered “manly” (193). Indeed, although Guro’s “camel” is shy, awkward, and physically weak, he is also portrayed as a threat to authority. One untitled vignette narrates a story about a “tender, timid, clean, tidy” boy who dares to “take pity and to love” and for this a vague “they” take him away from his mother and put him in prison, where he suffers from insomnia, parasites, and hunger (*S* 248-9). Whereas Woolf’s Western concept of a holy fool, Percival, benefits from the

13. During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the *iurodivyi*, through his devotion to Mother Earth, not the patriarchal state, came to represent an affront to tsarist authority and a savior for the peasantry (Hubbs 195).

patriarchal system, Guro's *iurodivyi* is oppressed because of his devotion to Mother Moist Earth.

Thus, in both *The Waves* and *Little Camels* the would-be hero is feminized by the maternal or queer narrator(s). In *The Waves*, we primarily see Percival through Neville's homoerotic gaze and Louis' misguided devotion. In *Little Camels*, the aspiring male poet is continuously infantilized by the maternal narrator, humiliated by his would-be lovers, and degraded by his elders. The failure of the heroes in both texts reflects another of Bakhtin's concepts, finalization. In monologic works, Bakhtin tells us, "the hero is not given the last word. He cannot break out of the fixed framework of the author's secondhand evaluation finalizing him" (*Problems* 70-1). By killing their heroes, or letting them fail, Guro and Woolf reject the "fixed framework" of the idyllic chronotope in favor of polyphony and dialogism. The monological, European hero has no place in the woman's sentence they are attempting to create.

2.4 Bad Mothers, Baba Yaga, and Mother Moist Earth: Feminine Archetypes

If returning to the past helped male modernists reclaim their masculinity in the new, uncertain century, can it also provide a context through which the feminine might triumph? Scholars have previously analyzed Woolf's Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda as the Jungian archetypes of Mother, Lover, and Virgin, respectively (Taylor 61). In this section, I will analyze Susan as an archetypal representation of femininity in Slavic culture, Baba Yaga,¹⁴ and discuss how Jinny appears to reject the archetype and embrace

14. Woolf's interest in Russian literature and culture has been well-documented. In her essay "The Russian Point of View," she bemoaned the inability to truly grasp Russian literature in translation, and in "Modern Fiction" she noted that "the least considerable of [Russian] novelists has by right a natural reverence for the human spirit ... the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings of others, love towards them" (Rubinstein 200).

the New Woman ideal. While the characters' acceptance, or rejection, of archetypes at first seems at first to empower them vis-à-vis their submissive masculine counterparts, Woolf ultimately shows that feminine archetypes of any kind are self-destructive and do not give women true agency.

Susan is by far the most recognizable archetype in *The Waves*. In the final section of the novel, Bernard ruminates on her goddess-like characteristics, describing her as the first of the friends “to become wholly woman, purely feminine ... She was born to be the adored of poets, since poets require safety; some one who sits sewing” (W 183). If the character of Percival serves to critique the hero of the man's sentence, the character of Susan is a critique of the man's sentence muse, the saintly, maternal pinnacle of femininity. While Woolf critiques Percival by robbing him of any character development or agency, she does not critique Susan herself, but man's conception of femininity as defined by physical beauty and motherhood. Instead, she advocates the resurgence of an old conception of femininity that links it with creativity. In all stages of life, from childhood to young adulthood to marriage to widowhood, female divinity is associated in Slavic cultures with embroidery, spinning and weaving (Hubbs 25). Similarly, in *The Waves*, Susan is often metaphorically associated with the act of sewing as a form of creativity:

Now I measure, I preserve. At night I sit in the arm-chair and stretch my arm for my sewing; and hear my husband snore; and ... feel the waves of my life tossed,

Thus, even if Woolf never studied Slavic folklore or recurring stock characters like the Holy Fool, I do not doubt that she was exposed to the values of Slavic culture through her voracious readings of writers like Dostoevskii, who was particularly interested in the Holy Fool archetype.

broken, round me who am rooted; and hear cries, and see others' lives eddying like straws round the piers of a bridge while I push my needle in and out and draw my thread through the calico. (140)

As its semantics indicate, the passage begins measuredly with the short, fragmented sentence "Now I measure, I preserve." As soon as Susan begins to sew, however, the sentences become longer, mirroring the movement of the "waves of my life" which are "tossed, broken ... eddying like straws." Susan's knitting is thus associated with not only creativity but reflection and self-awareness. By examining her own position as a feminine archetype—a mother—through a feminine act—sewing—she comes to a greater awareness of not only her own life but those around her. As a result, Woolf appropriates an archetypically feminine act and turns into a proto-postmodern revolutionary self-reflection. Through Susan, Woolf critically engages with the very concept of femininity that has been constructed by patriarchal discourse.

In contrast, Jinny is an idealized representation of the New Woman, a turn-of-the-century feminist ideal described by Gail Finney as a woman who, like Jinny, "values self-fulfillment and independence," "often remains single," "is more open about her sexuality," and is "physically vigorous" (195-6). As explored in Chapter One, Jinny is often metonymically represented in the text by the movement of her body, whether it is running in the garden as a child or dancing enticingly at parties as an adult, and metaphorically by the sexual call "Come, come." Moreover, she frequently appears strolling around highly urbanized, densely crowded areas, triumphantly describing them as "sanded paths of victory driven through the jungle" (W 141-2). If Susan seeks to "preserve" the natural world, Jinny embraces the revolutionary potential of technological

advancement. For all their differences in viewing the world, however, there is a sense of triumph and omnipotence shared by Susan and Jinny that is inextricably linked to their femininity and their abilities to thrive as women in different environments, Susan as a mother in the natural world and Jinny as a sexual being in the modern world. Tellingly, both women reference Percival, the dead masculine hero, in their monologues. As Jinny puts it, “millions have died. Percival died. I still move. I still love” (W 141). Still, despite her radically different personal beliefs, Jinny’s vision of the world is also associated with the feminine act of weaving. In the same monologue, she considers the “gauzes and silks” and “close stiches of fine embroidery” worn by passersby in the London Underground, comparing the movement of the crowd to “the waves of the sea” (W 142).

Nevertheless, the archetypal, divine femininity embodied in Susan’s Mother is ultimately portrayed as toxic and unfulfilling. If Susan is Baba Yaga the mother, then she is also Baba Yaga the terrifying witch. As Hubbs puts it, “Yaga is a mother, but a cannibal mother. She whose children are many ... is also the hungry one who devours them” (39). Susan is repeatedly depicted as possessive. In the novel’s third section, she remarks of her home, “*mine* are the flocks of birds ... *mine* is the heron that stretches its vast wings lazily ... all are *mine*” (W 70, my emphasis). When Susan becomes a mother, she possesses human beings as well. While walking with her son in the fifth section of the novel, Susan reflects, “I possess all I see” (W 138) and takes pleasure in the ability to say “my son” and “my daughter” (W 139). However, the role of the omnipotent, cannibalizing mother is ultimately unfulfilling for Susan. In the same passage, she remarks that she is “sick of the body ... sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who protects, who collects under her jealous eyes at

one long table her own children, always her own” (W 139). Most importantly, Susan’s embodiment of a primordial femininity robs her of the ability to create. In an earlier passage, which includes the rare future tense, Susan contemplates the inevitability of motherhood:

I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity. ... Also, I am torn with jealousy. I hate Jinny because she shows me that my hands are red, my nails bitten. I love with such ferocity that it kills me when the object of my love shows by a phrase that he can escape. He escapes, and I am left clutching at a string that slips in and out among the leaves on the tree-tops. I do not understand phrases. (W 95-6)

Tellingly, the passage, and Susan’s monologue in this section, ends with Susan’s helpless realization that she does not understand phrases. Phrases, the specialty of Bernard, are a key symbol in the novel of creativity and his quest to find “a language such as lovers use.” In her final solitary monologue, Susan again reflects on phrases, remembering with nostalgia “how the sun rose, and the swallows skimmed the grass, and phrases that Bernard made when we were children” (W 140). Thus, the production and understanding of phrases represent Susan’s untapped creativity.

In her essay “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva calls the cult of motherhood no more than “a masculine appropriation of the Maternal” (163). Indeed, while Susan is earthy and “maternal,” her earthiness and maternal qualities are inextricably connected with the phallic and *not* with the “archaic, woman-centered, hunters’ and horticulturalists’ myth which emphasizes the parthenogenetic aspects of earth’s creativity prior to masculine intervention”—that is, the Slavic Mother Moist Earth (Hubbs 53). During her first night

at school, for instance, Susan does not long for the country so much as she longs for her father who lives in the country (*W* 22) and when she returns home in the summer she realizes that she loves “no one, except my father” (*W* 28). Susan’s growing love for the phallic as she become more “wholly woman” coincides with her growing hatred for other women. Although she loves her children “with ferocity,” she grows to “hate” Jinny and other women because they, by not having children, reveal to her that her “hands are red” and “nails bitten” from the masochistic lifestyle to which she is devoted (*W* 96).

At first glance, Jinny’s promiscuity further solidifies as an ideal example of the independent New Woman. However, as Chloë Taylor reminds us, “Jinny’s metaphors for her own sense of empowerment are all phallic. She has no sense of power as a woman” (66). Just as Susan’s embodiment of the earthly mother/goddess archetype is dependent on her ability to love and nurture men, be it her father or her son, so Jinny’s embodiment of the New Woman is dependent on ability to sexually entice men. Moreover, Jinny might be free from the earthly mother/goddess archetype, but it is an ephemeral freedom destined to decay with time. In a later section, Jinny looks into the mirror and reflects with horror on ““how solitary, how shrunk, how aged”” she is, concluding, ““I am no longer young, I am no longer part of the procession”” (*W* 141). Perhaps even more troublingly, as Jinny becomes more attached to the phallic she becomes more separated from the feminine, which is reflected in her competitive attitude toward other women for the attention of men. As previously mentioned, Jinny is fixated on the fantasy of sleeping with men because they prefer her to Susan and Rhoda (*W* 39). In her description of another sexual encounter, she describes “girls of my own age, for whom I feel the drawn swords of an honourable antagonism” (*W* 75). Most devastating of all, however, is

Jinny's loss of feminine creativity as a result of her assimilation into the phallic world. Just as Susan does not understand phrases, Jinny remarks that she "cannot follow any thought from present to past" and "I do not dream" (W 29). Ultimately, Jinny is just as much of an illusion as Susan or Rhoda; in one instance, she tells a vague audience, "I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body ... I dazzle you; I make you believe that this is all" (W 93). Jinny thus may not accept primordial archetypes of femininity, but she does buy into the patriarchal internalization that her body is all she has to offer the world, and herself. Thus, as the feminine voices in *The Waves* pass from childhood to adulthood they are presented with three choices: embody the archetypal maternal world, a fate Susan dutifully, if not bitterly, accepts; assimilate fully into the urban patriarchal landscape, as Jinny triumphantly does but only temporarily will do; or live and die as an eternal outsider, which, as we will see in Chapter Three, is Rhoda's fate. The first two options finalize the characters. Once they have adapted to their roles, Mother/Baba Yaga, Lover/New Woman, respectively, they are unable to break free from the monological "fixed framework."

Guro, in contrast, seems to advocate a return to primitive femininity and motherhood. Still, this concept of "motherhood" comes with a crucial caveat. While Guro's feminine narrator possesses maternal concern for the masculine camel, she herself is not a biological mother, a fact that she outwardly states multiple times in the texts. In one unnamed sketch, for instance, she describes with sympathy the depression, loneliness, and eventual death from pneumonia of a man, lamenting "that was my son, my son...my unhappy only child" before abruptly explaining, "That wasn't my son at all, I'd never seen him. But I loved him because he got drenched like a homeless bird, and in

his deep grief didn't notice it"¹⁵ (*TLCOTS* 33). Markov takes pieces like this as examples of Guro's pathological obsession with the death of her only child (7). However, I find it more likely that Guro is pointing to a femininity that is not dependent on physically bearing children, but rather for possessing the best maternal qualities: respect for the organic, support for the unloved, marginalized voices in society, and privileging the symbolic over the semantic. As the narrator in *Little Camels* proves, as well as Guro herself, possessing these qualities does not necessitate biological motherhood; the narrator later tells us, "I have no children—perhaps that's why I love all that lives so unbearably. [...] It sometimes seems that I'm a mother to all things" (98). For Guro, then, it may be the absence of motherhood, the rejection of childbearing, that allows human beings to love all things equally and unselfishly, as opposed to the possessive, phallogocentric mother's love embodied by Susan and her mythic counterpart, Baba Yaga.

In fact, like Woolf, Guro portrays biological mothers quite negatively in *Little Camels*. For instance, one unnamed sketch in the work consists of a dialogue between a sensitive child, Lelia, and her unsympathetic mother. When Lelia anxiously asks after the fate of Don Quixote, who perfectly fits the portrait of Guro's Holy Fool, her mother responds, "You're interrupting my sewing, get to bed" (*TLCOTS* 32). The image of sewing, as previously mentioned, is closely connected with traditional Slavic concepts of femininity and motherhood. Here, however, the woman's sewing is not an act of creativity; if anything, it is used to stifle the creativity of her child. When Lelia again protests, asserting, "if a book lies, it must be an evil book," the mother warns her to "look

15. "Eto byl moi syn, moi syn, moe edinstvennoe, moe neschastnoe ditia. Eto vovse ne byl mne syn, ia ego i ne vidala nikogda, no ia ego poliubila za to, chto on mok, kak bespriutnaia ptitsa, i ot glubokogo goria ne zametil etogo" (*S* 247).

out or I'll punish you" (*TLCOTS* 32). Even more interestingly, this text is immediately followed by the vignette in which the maternal narrator mourns the death of her son, who "wasn't my son at all" (*TLCOTS* 33). Thus, Guro juxtaposes a toxic, biological motherhood, with an ideal, albeit solely spiritual, motherhood. Still another text depicts supposedly nurturing women in a negative light. "A Child's Chatter" ("Detskaia boltovnia") is also structured as a conversation, between a youth and their nanny. While the nanny is at first receptive to the child's questions about the life and death of cats, when they ask if "kittycats have souls," the nanny frustrated orders them to "go to sleep, you brat" before threatening them with corporeal punishment (*TLCOTS* 96).

The bad biological mother is contrasted with the positive, unnamed woman narrator who mediates between the feminine earth and the masculine urban realm. "A Conversation" ("Razgovor"), finds an unnamed female narrator waiting at a train station to return home from the "bright, festive and painful" city and having a metaphysical dialogue with the "caressing, mild and moist" surrounding forest (*TLCOTS* 23). Another vignette sees a narrator communicating, again through her soul (the feminine word *dusha*), with the "dry and needly," "sacred" earth, who tells the narrator "'you know, you're the only one!'" before the narrator is interrupted by somebody calling them to dinner (*TLCOTS* 39). In contrast to the previous piece, the gender of the narrator in this sketch is left ambiguous, as if to imply that maternal qualities are not restricted to one's biological sex or childbearing ability. Indeed, in her essay "Castration or Decapitation?" (1976), Hélène Cixous contends, "writing in the feminine is passing on ... the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic" (54). At the same time, however, recovering the true, archaic voice of the mother "destroys the form of the family structure, so that it

is defamilialized, can no longer be thought in terms of the attribution of roles within a social cell” (Cixous, “Castration,” 53). Thus, the maternal, and for that matter the feminine, is not thought in terms of biological motherhood but in its ability to restore language to its primordial state.

2.5 Conclusions

The final section of *The Waves* is narrated solely by Bernard, who tells us that he, unlike the other five voices and Percival, was ““preserved”” (W 179). He then proceeds to study the ““character of our friends,’ as if clinically studying their archetypal psychologies (W 180). Bernard’s speech confirms what the novel repeatedly articulates, which is that archetypes, masculine or feminine, cannot survive in modern society. Woolf and Guro’s caricatures exist against a backdrop of environmental degradation, industrialization, and the devaluation of the (masculine) poet-hero.

But if masculinity and its offshoots of capitalism and imperialism are destructive, so too is traditional femininity and motherhood, two concepts to which Woolf and Guro betray tentative, if not outright hostile, attitudes. Kristeva’s essay “Stabat Mater” asks the question, “what are the aspects of the feminine psyche for which that representation of motherhood does not provide a solution or else provides one that is felt as too coercive by twentieth-century women?” (182). Indeed, despite the apparent omnipotence of the feminine in Woolf and Guro’s texts, the cult of motherhood proves coercive for Susan in *The Waves*, while the mother figure in *Little Camels* is unable to stop the masculine establishment, and biological mothers, from corrupting her “children.” It seems that a rejection of myth, be it heroic masculinity or the male-created cult of motherhood, is needed so that women in fiction can escape the finalization of the “man’s sentence.”

3. Queering the Sentence: *The Waves* and *Little Camels* as Prototypes and Reworkings of *l'écriture féminine*

3.1 The Man/Woman Binary and the Hysteric

In her 1975 work *The Newly Born Woman* (*Le jeune née*), Cixous considers a writing, *écriture*, not governed by the hierarchal system of binaries in which we see man/woman in myth, philosophy, and literature. For instance, she makes a list of binaries, including sun/moon, culture/nature, and logos/pathos, to show how the feminine is always grouped in the latter category as a means of ensuring her inferior position vis-à-vis the active, cultured, and logocentric masculine (“The Newly Born Woman” 37-8). For Cixous, “every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems ... is all ordered around hierarchal oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition” (“Castration or Decapitation?” 44).

Of all the binaries she lists, Cixous is most interested in activity/passivity, since, according to her, “the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with [this] opposition” (“The Newly Born Woman” 38). Interestingly, this binary is also the one which Woolf and Guro most successfully subvert. The male figures in both texts are dreamers who by the end of their lives have little to show for. Bernard, for all his phrase-making, concludes toward the end of the novel that “I am not so gifted as at one time seemed likely. Certain things lie beyond my scope” (*W* 135). Later, defeated, he drops his trusted book of phrases to the ground, “under the table to be swept up by the charwoman” (*W* 219). Neville, in the characters’ final scene together, observes, “we are in that passive and exhausted frame of mind when we only wish to rejoin the body of our mother from whom we have been severed. All else is distasteful, forced and fatiguing” (*W* 171). Like the Slavic *Ivan durak*, the male characters in *The Waves* long for a passive, safe existence

with Mother Earth. On the other hand, the female figures are proactive. Susan lords over her countryside home; she gives birth to and possesses her children, tends to the surrounding animals and plants, and experiences “natural happiness” thanks to her active mindset. Jinny thrives on physical activity; she wanders the crowded streets of London with her female flaneur gaze, dances at parties, and enthusiastically initiates fleeting sexual relationships with men. In Chapter One, I pointed out how the masculine human narrator in Guro’s prose piece “At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day” is passive whilst the speaker’s “hand” (*ruka*, a feminine noun) performs the action of throwing the stone (*TLCOTS* 19).

Rhoda, while crippled by depression and anxiety, is perhaps the most creatively active of all the characters. At first glance, like Susan, she shares numerous characteristics with mythological figures. Bernard describes her as “the nymph of the fountain always wet” (*W* 84). She thus evokes the Slavic *rusalka*, a water nymph portrayed as both a suicidal maiden and a dangerous siren (Hubbs 28). Indeed, from childhood, Rhoda is repeatedly associated with water. In the first section, she describes how “cold water begins to run from the scullery tap” (*W* 5) and later sets about “rocking petals to and fro in her brown basin” as if they were ships (*W* 11). Moreover, like Susan, Rhoda succumbs to the most toxic characteristics of her archetype. In Slavic folklore, the *rusalki* are regarded as “the souls of girls who had drowned themselves because of desertion by a lover or rejection by a parent” (Hubbs 30). While Bernard does not disclose the cause of Rhoda’s death, it is implied that she drowns herself. In young adulthood, Rhoda experiences an attack of anxiety upon crossing a puddle, as if foreshadowing her fate (*W* 114), and in her final monologue she fantasizes about

“sink[ing] and settl[ing] on the waves ... rolling me over the waves will shoulder me over. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me” (W 151). However, unlike the *rusalka* it is Rhoda who abandons her lover, Louis, because she “feared embraces” (W 150) and Louis tells us that she has no father (W 12). Thus, Rhoda has no connection to the material masculine world, unlike the *rusalka* and Baba Yaga, or her friends Susan and Jinny. “If I could believe ... that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear,” Rhoda explains at one point, but “I have no end in view” (W 94). In having “no end in view,” Rhoda resists the finalization to which Susan and Jinny fall victim. Rather than rejoice in this, however, Rhoda becomes terrified to the point of suicide; she does, after all, lives in a world that punishes women for not complying with the finalization process.

Still, unlike Susan, Rhoda’s archetypal femininity is artificially constructed; she must closely follow Susan’s cues, observing, “Susan sometimes teaches me, for instance, how to tie a bow, while Jinny has her own knowledge but keeps it to herself” (W 29-30). The performative aspect of Rhoda’s femininity is further illustrated by a fantasy she has of being an empress:

“... as I bend my head down over the basin, I will let the Russian Empress’ veil flow about my shoulders. The diamonds of the Imperial crown blaze on my forehead. I hear the roar of the hostile mob as I step out on to the balcony. Now I dry my hands, vigorously, so that Miss, whose name I forget, cannot suspect that I am waving my fist at an infuriated mob. ‘I am your Empress, people.’ My attitude is one of defiance. I am fearless. I conquer.” (W 39)

Most importantly, this passage marks Rhoda as a representation of what Cixous calls “the Absolute Woman”: the hysteric. Like Rhoda in her Empress fantasy, Cixous contends the hysteric “plays, makes up, makes-believe: she makes-believe she is a woman, unmake-believe too ... plays at desire” (“Castration or Decapitation?” 47). Rhoda must follow Susan’s and Jinny’s social cues in order to “make believe” she is a woman. Cixous adds that the hysteric is unable to recognize herself in the images others give her (“Castration or Decapitation?” 47). When applied to Rhoda, this description takes on quite a literal meaning. Upon seeing a mirror, for instance, Rhoda proclaims, “that is my face ... in the looking-glass behind Susan’s shoulder—that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide It, for I am not here. I have no face” (*W* 29). Rhoda rejects the literal image of herself that is projected by the material world.

According to Cixous, “if there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically it is her capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without ‘end,’ without principal ‘parts’” (“The Newly Born Woman” 44). Rhoda is devoid of bodily parts; she has “no face.” Moreover, the woman writer “is not able to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other ... she is not the being-of-the-end (the goal)” (“The Newly Born Woman” 44). As we saw in Chapter Two, Rhoda constantly laments the fact that she has no “end in sight,” and in an earlier soliloquy, she states, “I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body” (*W* 30). Rhoda’s disembodiment disrupts another generally accepted binary, which associates the masculine with the mind, and hence freedom, and the feminine with the body, and hence passivity and sexuality (Butler 17). Indeed, we might return to Percival, who in this case actually aligns with the archetypal “feminine,” that is bodily, subject of Neville’s

homoerotic gaze. In contrast, Rhoda denies her body and her sexuality; she refuses to look in the mirror and fears embraces.

3.2 “A Great Mind is Androgynous”: Non-Binary Gender Identities in the Works

Nevertheless, I do not see Rhoda—or Guro’s characters—as affirming their sexual difference, which Cixous advocates. Rather, I see them as rejecting sexual essentialism and affirming androgyny. Most Woolf scholars point to Bernard as an example of the androgynous artist, an ideal Woolf articulated in *A Room of One’s Own*. Borrowing from Coleridge’s statement that “a great mind is androgynous,” Woolf wonders if “a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (AROOO 71). Woolf continues, explaining, “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (AROOO 71). From this description, as well as the theories of Cixous and Kristeva, I would suggest that the *l’écriture féminine* Woolf posits in *The Waves* is not Bernard’s phrase-making, but Rhoda’s feminine subjectivity. In early drafts of *The Waves*, originally titled *The Moths*, moths represent the language Bernard is striving to discover. The holograph draft of *The Waves* begins with a description of “an enormous moth” with a crescent mark on its wings which “made a mysterious hieroglyph, always dissolving” (Scott 37). The moth thus possesses a secret language that is always out of reach of *l’écriture féminine*. Rhoda, in turn, is often compared to a moth. Susan likens Rhoda’s eyes to “those pale flowers to which moths come in the evening” (W 9), while Louis compares her shoulder blades to “the wings of a small butterfly” (W 14). Most significantly, at the end of *The Waves* Bernard tells us that Rhoda, like the *écriture féminine* she represents, is “wild—Rhoda one never could catch” (W 183)

In addition to her connection to the moth, Rhoda is distinguished from the other characters by her fluid sexual identity. Originally, Woolf wrote Rhoda as a lesbian with an erotic fixation on a character named Alice (Kostkowska 71), but in the final version her sexuality is far less clear. While Louis describes them as “lovers” (W 123), Rhoda hints at her aversion toward sex, admitting that she “left Louis” because she “feared embraces” (W 150), a line which causes Kostkowska to describe Rhoda as “asexual and withdrawn” (72). Given the explicit sexuality of the maternal Susan and the promiscuous Jinny, Woolf’s decision to leave Rhoda’s sexual orientation ambiguous marks her as separate from not only the heterosexual characters, but from the homosexual Neville as well. As she grows older, moreover, Rhoda laments her destiny “to be derided all my life” and “cast up and down among these men and women” (W 77). Rhoda’s differentiation of herself from “men and women,” as well as her fear of humiliation because of this differentiation, illustrates her struggle to conform to a society with rigid definitions of gender binaries.

Finally, during the (anti) climactic scene at Hampton Court, Rhoda attributes her unusual lack of anxiety to “the still mood, the disembodied mood” (W 168). Woolf’s use of the word “disembodied” links the reunion scene with the first passage of *The Waves*, in which the children play together with no recognition of gender binaries and sexual desires. Further, as in the first pages of *The Waves*, Rhoda and Louis serve as outsiders, or “conspirators” as they call themselves (W 166) and observe the way their four friends come closer. Louis, watching their figures, wonders, “Are they men or are they women? They still wear the ambiguous draperies of the flowing tide in which they have been immersed,” while Rhoda immediately decides “They are only men, only women. Wonder

and awe change as they put off the draperies of the flowing tide. Pity returns” (*W* 170). Rhoda’s use of the word “pity” illustrates her disappointment in the return of gender binaries.¹⁶

Guro’s characters, too, experience crises of the body and hint at androgyny. As Bennett puts it, “Guro intentionally ignores, distorts and destroys traditional boundaries including that which delineates masculine from feminine” (3). In the prose piece “Forest Thoughts” (“Lesnye mysli”), Guro, speaking from the point of view of a thirty-four-year-old woman, turns her attention away from the titular camel to tell a story of two girls. She describes the first, Tania, as “a little girl the color of light straw, with transparent, almost cloud-like flesh. Her life is one of my dreams” (*TLCOTS* 92). The other remains unnamed:

This other one no one ever caressed, and she didn’t know she had a body and that it could be admired. Brusquely, they always made her hurry to get dressed after her bath: a body was just an inconvenient thing you had to hide. Once while drying the girl off after her bath, a new servant girl suddenly burst into loud, lively laughter and grabbed the girl’s stomach where there was a funny dappled mole, like a beauty mark.¹⁷ (*TLCOTS* 92)

16. However, in an early draft of *The Waves*, Kostkowska points out, “asking if they are men or women, Rhoda adds, ‘They might be either’” (84).

17. Druguiu sovsem ne laskali, I ona ne znala, chto u nee est’ telo i im mozžno

lyubovat’sia. Ee vseгда rezko toropili odevat’sia posle vanny: telo bylo prosto

maloudobnaia shtuka, kotoruiu nado priatat’. Raz novaia devushka, vytiraia devochku

As a result of this traumatic experience, the girl becomes “impermissibly brusque, and they wanted to whip her for some monstrous crime ‘against etiquette’” (*TLCOTS* 92). Worse, she develops a “panicky, deathly fear that they’d offend her by touching her” (*TLCOTS* 93). Like Woolf’s Rhoda, who “fear[s] embraces,” Guro’s unnamed girl suffers from a crippling sense of disembodiment and shame. While the vignette attributes the initial trauma to “a funny dappled mole, like a beauty mark,” I take this to be a metaphor for the girl’s inability to fit into a certain gender binary; as she grows older, her elders frequently beat her “for some monstrous crime ‘against etiquette’” (*TLCOTS* 92). Interestingly, however, the body of this androgynous girl is described in more concrete detail than Tania, who is described as “transparent,” “one of my dreams,” and “a little lamb of the sky, a god to her mother and the servants” (*TLCOTS* 92). Moreover, the unnamed girl is written about in the present tense. While O’Brien translates it as “she didn’t know that she *had* a body and then it *could* be loved,” the Russian literally reads as “she didn’t know that she *has* a body and that it *can* be loved” (“ona ne znala, chto u nee est’ telo i im mozžno liubovat’sia”). Thus, Guro contrasts the myth of the girl Tania, self-assured in her angelic femininity, with the reality of the unloved girl who does not fit into a gender binary. Further, she leaves it ambiguous which state is preferable, ending the piece with the sentence, “I envy *one of* these girls” (*TLCOTS* 93, my emphasis).

Additionally, in Chapter One, I explored Guro’s ample use of personification as an example of her estrangement of the sentence, but here I want to consider the

posle vanny, vdrug rassmeialas’ gromko i zadorno i khvatila ee za zhivot, gde pestrela, kak mushka, smeshnaia rodinka. (*S* 312)

implications of personification in a gendered language like Russian. By worshipping inanimate feminine objects and assigning feminine qualities to inanimate masculine objects, Guro constructs her own portrait of an androgynous artist—or a hysteric. For instance, in one unnamed sketch, Guro personifies evening, which in Russian is the masculine noun *vecher*, as a means of exploring the repression of femininity in the masculine:

And so tender and merciful was that evening with its high, pensive brow that indeed it deserved to be punished for its mercy and compassion and love.

Punished with pain for its purity and height.

And it also had a right to be crucified—that tender evening looking like spring, and the distant forgotten homeland of the soul....¹⁸ (*TLCOTS* 33)

In Russian, the word “love” (*liubov'*) is feminine, as is height (*vysota*) and purity (*chistota*). The masculine evening (*vecher*) is being punished for possessing feminine qualities. The androgyny of the personified evening is further emphasized by its similarity in appearance to the feminine “spring” (*vesna*) and “the distant forgotten homeland of the soul,” as “homeland” (*rodina*) and “soul” (*dusha*) are both important

18. I tak nezhen i miloserd etot vecher s vysokim zadumchivym lbom, chto, pravo, on zaslužhil, chtoby ego nakazali za milo-serdie, i sostradanie, i liubov'. Chtoby ego bol'no nakazali za ego vysotu i chistotu.

I tak zhe imel pravo byt' raspiat etot nezhnyi vecher, pokhozhii na vesnu i na dalekuii pozabytuiu rodinu dushi. (*S* 247)

feminine nouns closely associated with Russia.¹⁹ The masculine looks like the distant forgotten homeland of the feminine. In another unnamed prose piece, Guro again takes a masculine noun, in this case “forest” (*les*), personifies it, and hints at a repressed femininity. Like a mother, the forest is used to “lullabying the clouds” and like Mother Moist Earth, the forest is “desecrated by man” (*TLCOTS* 30). Lastly, in the vignette “Dragonfly” (“*Strekoza*”), Guro not only personifies the titular bug, but endows it with hyperfeminine qualities, then turns it into a synecdoche for a masculine character. She refers to the creature as a “dragonfly-jewel-princess” (“*strekoza, dragotsennost’, tsarevna*”), who then flies onto the lower back of an unnamed male figure, glinting “ruby-like on his tattered trousers; while before his wide—as if enchanted only now—eyes... another, deep blue, rises and falls, rises rocking on the honied surges of summer”²⁰ (*TLCOTS* 37). Only by taking on a feminine attribute, by performing the “foolish and kindly appearance” of the feminine, does the male figure become “enchanted.” Guro describes this sensation in rather erotic terms; the distinctly feminine dragonfly lands on the man’s trousers, causing his eyes to widen in enchantment amidst the “honied surges of summer.” The eroticism of the language, and the conscious decision to make the dragonfly so archetypically feminine, transform this particular sketch into something that I believe goes beyond Guro’s classic Mother Nature/cultured son binary. Here the

19. I am thinking here of “the motherland,” also translated as “Mother Russia” (*Rodina mat’*) and the influential nineteenth century concept of the “Russian soul” (*russkaia dusha*).

20. “*Strekoza sverkaet rubinom na ego dranykh pantalonakh, a pered ego shirokimi, tochno v pervye ocharovannymi glazami, drugaia, siniaia, opuskaetsia i podnimaetsia, podnimaetsia, kachaias’ na medovykh letnikh volnakh.*” (*S* 253)

masculine figure is not seeking creative inspiration from passive Mother Earth; rather, feminine nature is actively seeking to queer the man's appearance.

On the surface, then, Woolf and Guro take a simplistic approach to gender in *The Waves* and *Little Camels*, one which paints men as active and cultured and relegates women to the domestic, erotic, and natural spheres. However, they counteract these archetypal representations of masculinity and femininity with the androgynous artist, which is (dis)embodied in Woolf's Rhoda and Guro's recurring camel-poet.

3.3 The Semiotic and the Symbolic: Revisiting Estrangement

Kristeva formulated her own conception of *l'écriture féminine*, though she resisted the term itself (Wolff 131). More specifically, she associated the symbolic (that is, language that has undergone signification) with the masculine, and the semiotic (pre-linguistic sensations) with the feminine. Janet Wolff offers a concise explanation of Kristeva's argument and its relation to *l'écriture féminine*:

Julia Kristeva contrasts the realm of the Symbolic (the law of the Father, identified with the coincident with the coming into language of the child) with what she calls the 'semiotic.' The semiotic is the pre-linguistic, the bodily drives, rhythms, and 'pulsions' experienced by the child in the infantile fusion with the mother. These pleasures and feelings are repressed on entry into the Symbolic (131)

Thus, for Kristeva, *l'écriture féminine* necessitates a return to language *before* it undergoes the phallogentric process of signification. Through this lens, Woolf and Guro's uses of estrangement, the child's point of view, and focus on rhythm rather than plot are not simply formalist devices; they evoke a desire to become acquainted with the feminine

semiotic. In this sense, the very title of Woolf's text, *The Waves*, acts as an affirmation of the pre-linguistic creativity of the semiotic realm. Indeed, the text begins with the phrase "the waves broke on the shore," followed by the six main characters, unconstrained by gender roles or capitalism, exploring the surroundings of their earthly seaside village with childlike creativity.

It should be noted that Kristeva did not believe the semiotic could be encountered through literature, since literature necessitates signification and is thus located in the realm of the Symbolic. However, in the sketch "A Mystery" ("Taina"), Guro implies that poets *can* return to the semiotic through closeness with Mother Earth:

All poets, makers of future signs—must go barefoot while the earth is seized with summer. Our feet are still innocent and simple-hearted, inexperienced and easily enraptured. The smooth salty sand seems slightly frozen beneath bare feet, and only between toes do those now-hot, now-cold currents stir. The earth converses with naked feet. Beneath a bare foot a board will sing of heat. And only then will you know your nearness to it.²¹ (*TLCOTS* 44)

21. Vsem poetam, tvortsam buduschikh znakov-- khodit' bosikom, poka zemlia letniaia. Nashi nogi esche nevinny i prostodushny, neopytny i skoree voskhischaiutsia. Pod bosymi nogami plotnyi solenyi pesok, tochno slegka zamorozhennyi, i tol'ko mezh' pal'tsev sheveliatsia to kholodnye, to teplye struiki. S golymi nogami razgovarivaet zemlia. Pod bosoi nogoi poet doska o teple. Tol'ko tut uznaesh' doroguiu blizost' s nei. (*S* 261)

Since the Russian word for ‘earth’ (*zemlia*) is a feminine noun, the sentence “and only then will you know your nearness to it” could also be translated as “only in this way can you find dear closeness with *her*,” as Bennett does in her essay (100). Guro thus insists upon a distinctly feminine creativity for the construction of “future signs.” Her choice of words here is fascinating, as “signs” has an almost scientific connotation. As in English, ‘sign’ (*znak*) refers to the linguistic unit, so it can be inferred that Guro is referring to the construction of a new way of perceiving and naming the world, not simply a new literary movement.

Similarly, Rhoda seeks spiritual and physical closeness with the feminine, represented by the rise and fall of the titular waves:

There ... are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you, it is not you, it is not you; not Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville or Louis. ... Behind it roars the sea. It is beyond our reach. Yet there I venture. There I go to replenish my emptiness, to stretch my nights and fill them fuller and fuller with dreams. (*W* 100-1)

Like Kristeva, Rhoda acknowledges that the semiotic is “beyond our reach.” Still, she longs for a pre-linguistic, rhythmic space where she can exercise her creativity through “dreams,” and reject gender binaries; she can be “a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive” in contrast to the rigid archetypes represented by Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville and Louis.

3.4 “Women’s Time,” Woman’s Sentence, and the Problem of an Ending

Lastly, both writers reject the temporal normativity of the “man’s sentence,” or, in Kristevan terms, the Symbolic. In a 1929 diary entry on *The Moths*, Woolf articulates a

desire to “do away with exact place and time” in the text (*WD* 140). A subjective interpretation of time is crucial to women’s experience, according to Kristeva, for whom “female subjectivity ... retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time,” which includes “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality” (“Women’s Time” 191). Biological rhythm is most evident in *The Waves*, whose central conceit is the constant rising and falling of the titular entities, as well as sunrise and sunset and the birth and death of its characters. At the same time, the novel is written in what Molly Hite terms “lyric present” (*W* xlii). Characters speak in declarative, present-tense sentences to describe both their own actions, such as Susan’s “I love and I hate” (*W* 9), and the action of the characters and objects around them, as in Louis’ observation that “A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps” (*W* 4) Bernard states that he is “not one of those who find their satisfaction in ... infinity” (*W* 135). In contrast, Rhoda craves the infinity of *l’écriture féminine*. She criticizes “life” for “how you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair ... how you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour ... yet those were my life” (*W* 149).

Finally, Cixous explains that writing which is feminine does not come to a discernable end or provide the reader closure; it is “the text of the unforeseeable” (“Castration,” 53). In contrast to the polyphonic nature of the rest of the text, *The Waves* ends with a long monologue delivered solely by Bernard, who attempts to “sum up” his life and the lives of his five friends. The soliloquy ends with Bernard’s ambiguous meeting with Death:

“And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. ... What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. ... Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (W 220)

At first glance, this passage goes against everything Woolf has been advocating throughout *The Waves*. Bernard venerates the proto-fascist imperialist Percival, tries to impose the phallogentric “I” by reducing the lives of his friends to a single narrative, and attempts to conquer nature by cheating death. However, it is not Bernard who actually ends *The Waves*. Rather, the final line is another iteration of that central leitmotif: “the waves broke on the shore” (W 220). Thus, it is not Bernard and his man’s sentence who ends *The Waves*, but the infinite, unforeseeable rhythm of *l’écriture féminine*.

The ending of *Little Camels* is problematic at first glance as well. If Guro’s sketches constitute *l’écriture féminine* in its purest form, as writing without structure, temporality, or linearity, then the final passage, “A Promise” (“Obeshchaite”), sees Guro uncharacteristically *telling*, rather than *showing*, her readers her message:

Swear, you distant and near, who write on paper with your ink... on clouds with your gaze... on canvas with your paint—swear, never to betray, never once to slander the beautiful, newly formed face of your dream ...

[...] Swear this, you especially, who write on clouds with your gaze—clouds change shape—it’s that easy to smear the face of yesterday’s dream with unbelief.

Promise, promise! Promise this to life, promise this to me!

Promise!²² (*TLCOTS* 102)

Thus, it may be argued that Woolf and Guro betray the values of *l'écriture féminine* by simplifying their messages too much, by being *too* accessible to their readers in the final passages of their respective texts. Scott wonders if Woolf chose to close *The Waves* with Bernard's "masculine ending" to offer "a rope to throw the reader" (*W* 33). However, I would argue that any simplification toward the end of the works is balanced by the ambiguity of each work's final line. Guro ends by demanding "Promise!"

("Obeschaite!"). With no direct object to follow it, with not even a period to bring it to a normative conclusion, the interjection "promise!" lingers like a fermata in a musical score. Further, while Guro is clearly imploring her readers to remain idealistic and creative, she still employs estrangement, speaking to "you ... who write on clouds with your gaze" and personifying "the beautiful, newly formed face of your dream." Woolf tricks her reader into believing that Bernard, the phallogocentric I, has successfully conquered death. However, the waves still break on the shore, the semiotic rhythms of *l'écriture féminine* continue long after he delivers his final soliloquy.

22. Poklianites', dalekie i blizkie, pishushchie na bumage chernilame, vzorom na oblakakh, kraskoi na kholste, poklianites' nikogda ne izmeniat', ne klevetat' na raz sozdannoe—prekrasnoe—litso vashei mechty ...

[...] Poklianites' osobenno pishushchie na oblakakh vzorom—oblaka izmeniaiat formu—tak legko oporochit' ikh vcherashnii lik neveriem.

Obeshchaite, pozhaluista! Obeshchaite eto zhizni, obeshchaite mne eto!

Obeshchaite! (*S* 323)

Conclusion: Who is “She” and Where is “She”?

Thus we ourselves create forgotten beauty, and then it pursues us, stings us and demands the warmth it was denied, the light it was driven from—bereft of that light, it simply went away ... ²³ (*TLCOTS* 64)

This thesis has aimed to explore the ways in which *The Waves* and *The Little Camels of the Sky* structurally, thematically, and linguistically subvert the conventions of the European novel, which has been dominated by the “man’s sentence.” Through their union of rhythm and plot, metaphor and metonymy, dialogue and monologue, and the visual and the textual, Guro and Woolf unite prosaic and poetic modes of language to estrange the subject and explore the spaces in between: in between the visual and the textual, the child’s language and the adult’s language, nature and culture, the feminine and the masculine.

In her diary entry on *The Moths*, Woolf envisioned the climax of her play-poem as taking place “when she opens the window and the moth comes.” She continues:

But who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name. I don’t want a Lavinia or a Penelope. I want “she.” But that becomes arty, Liberty greenery yallery somehow: symbolic in loose robes. Of course I can make her think backwards and forwards; I can tell stories. But that’s not it. (*WD* 140)

Woolf’s rejection of Penelope and Lavinia implies that all feminine figures who emerge out of the patriarchal tradition cannot truly *be* feminine. Her concerns anticipate Simone de Bouvier, who posited that “*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a

23. Tak sozdaem my sami zabytuiu krasotu, i potom ona gonjaetsia za nami, i zhalit nas, i trebuet sebe tepla, v kotorom ei bylo otkazano, sveta, ot kotorogo ee prognali, i bez kotorogo ona tak i ushla ... (*S* 282)

constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler 45). Perhaps *l’écriture féminine*, too, is a constant becoming, an endless examination and reexamination of binaries. By extension, perhaps what we encounter in *The Waves* and in *The Little Camels of the Sky* is not *l’écriture féminine*—though the works do incorporate elements of what Cixous and Kristeva identify as “feminine writing,” such as a focus on rhythm, a-temporality, and estrangement—but a straining *toward* the woman’s sentence. It is a strain away from a world that seeks to dominate the feminine semiotic, both materially—through patriarchy, imperialism, and environmental degradation—and linguistically, through literature’s dependence on myth, archetype, and strict masculine/feminine. Indeed, until these discourses are fully deconstructed, *l’écriture féminine* may be relegated to the forgotten beauty of the semiotic realm—for Guro, to the world of clouds, camels, and dreams, and for Woolf to the incessant rise and fall of the waves.

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