

## Posthuman Identity as a Strategy for Staying in Life in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

Dave Shaw

There are some surprising benefits to reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* through the cultural lens of 2016. In an historical moment that has seen a dramatic increase in general awareness of the transgender community and the struggles that tend to accompany being a transgender person, we are perhaps uniquely poised to recognize the novel's titular character's sudden transition into being in life as a woman not simply as commentary on the constructed nature of gender, but also as an act of courage from a person who is fighting against the normative structures of attachment that characterize her own historical context. It is with this in mind that this essay will offer a reading of *Orlando* as a strategy for remaining in life after becoming disenchanted with the world, with a focus on the manner in which Orlando's non-normative being in life enables her to produce a model of her own agency which prefigures posthuman theorist Karen Barad's model of "agential realism."

Orlando's first step toward disenchantment with the world is presented through his relationship with the Russian princess. The princess, or Sasha as he comes to know her, introduces herself to him at a dinner party, at which the two of them lampoon the party's distinguished guests. Sasha's open distaste for the English upper-class seems to confront Orlando with a new and literally foreign mode for interpreting his relationship to his peers. As Orlando's biographer explains, Sasha's comments "rather discomposed Orlando at first, they were put with such archness and drollery that he could not help but laugh" (30). In this way, Sasha's rhetorical wit serves to dislodge Orlando from his previously unconsidered embeddedness in English society, such that he is able to laugh along with Sasha from the outside. Notably, both Sasha and Orlando are able to achieve this outsider status through language: as they are the only two party guests able to speak in French (excluding the other Russian diplomats, who all remain silent), they are able to situate themselves outside of the normative mode of discourse, within which a comparison of the Queen to a maypole would be almost literally unthinkable. Sasha, whose position as a foreign diplomat already places her outside of the English "spirit of the age", invites Orlando to join her on the outside, and their ensuing relationship, which of course becomes the "scandal of the court" (31), essentially represents a shift in Orlando's attachments from the normative set of objects that comprise Elizabethan values (i.e., unwavering respect for English royalty and an aversion to scandal of any kind), to the non-normative object of a sordid romance with a foreign diplomat. The point here isn't so much to highlight Orlando's newfound love (which itself becomes a somewhat dangerous object of attachment), but rather his newfound ability to shift outside of the normative set of cultural values to which he was previously tethered. Through language, Orlando discovers an ability to position himself outside of his normative objects of attachment.

This fascination with language as a tool for transgressing social boundaries provides a large part of Orlando's interest in the profession of writing. Indeed, following the abrupt conclusion of his relationship with Sasha, Orlando appears to understand his "unfitness for the life of society" as a kind of proof of the fact that he is "by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat"

(62). It is worth here considering what this conclusion implies: for Orlando, the writer represents a figure who functions outside of social constructions, with little to no bodily existence in the world itself. Having only known writers through their published artifacts, Orlando naively assumes that these books are the primary interaction of the writer with his world. His dinner with Nicholas Greene serves to disabuse him of this idea, as Greene reveals the authors of the great works of the Elizabethan age to be guilty of base and worldly attachments. This disillusionment again serves to make Orlando laugh: "These then were his gods! Half were drunken and all were amorous...Their poetry was scribbled down on the backs of washing bills held to the heads of printer's devils at the street door" (67). In this way, Orlando is confronted with an image of the writer not as a disembodied figure of reflection and commentary, but rather a being in the world, with worldly attachments and obligations. This point is further driven home when Greene later satirizes Orlando himself, publishing a short pamphlet that "ran at once into several editions, and paid the expenses of Mrs. Greene's tenth lying-in" (70). Comic undertones aside, the dinner with Greene ultimately serves to highlight what exactly it is about the writer that Orlando wishes to emulate: it is not the writerly lifestyle, but rather, the transcendental position of the writer's works above worldly attachments and social conventions. Having realized that this immateriality is a feature of their work but not the writers themselves, Orlando is again forced to change his attachments, purchasing a pair of elk hounds and resolutely announcing that he is "done with men" (71).

It is following this incident that Orlando enters his first episode of solitude, and Woolf makes it clear that it is a solitude borne of disinterest in the world, as Orlando's biographer reflects, "[a]t the age of thirty, or thereabouts, this young Nobleman has not only had every experience that life has to offer, but had seen the worthlessness of all of them" (71). Having given up on the normative set of experiences offered by the world, Orlando is uniquely poised to draw some of his own conclusions about the relationship between humans and time. He decides that "[t]he mind of man...works with equal strangeness upon the body of time...time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short" (72). I should note, as well, that this conclusion isn't particularly unique or compelling in itself; it's actually a kind of banal truism. What makes it interesting, for our purposes, is that Orlando develops this view for himself and thus realizes it to be true: having fully dislodged himself from his previous mode of being, which was heavily influenced by convention, Orlando's sense of self becomes untethered from the regimented rhythms that keep time feeling normalized. Instead, Orlando's newfound queer existence holds time at a distance, such that he's able to decide how his relationship with it is going to function. As Woolf explains, "Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most" (73). Interestingly, this ambivalent relationship with time is the only real explanation we're given for the radically long length of Orlando's life. Indeed, Orlando himself seems to take his longevity in stride, thus suggesting that one's temporality is simply another dimension of one's embeddedness within "the spirit of the age". This is to say, Orlando's extended being in life is the direct result of his not wanting the world.

At this juncture it might be in our best interest to be a bit more explicit about what we mean by this distinction between "life" and "the world," and what exactly it means to be in the

former without wanting the latter. By “life,” I mean to connote a generic, impersonal force of pure vitality. In this sense, I’m using “life” much in the same way Rosi Braidotti uses it, as a conceptual tool for distancing the human subject from his or her being in life. In her book, *The Posthuman*, she writes, “Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity” (131). While this kind of rhetoric might seem to be a recent innovation of vitalist materialism, it’s worth noting that the modern English word “alive,” which implies that life is a property of individual bodies (i.e., “he is alive”) is actually rooted in the Old English term “on life,” or “in living,” which is much more suggestive of a temporally dependant relationship between “life” and “self” (i.e., one can be “in life” in the same way that one can be “in the grocery store”; it’s not so much a property *of* the subject, but rather a thing that the subject is in and experiencing).

In contrast to this, “the world” could be understood as the normative set of temporally-bounded objects of attachment that hold the subject in a rigid relationship to “life,” such that the distinction appears to dissolve. This tethering of subjectivities to the world produces what Lauren Berlant calls a relationship of “cruel optimism,” or “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (*Cruel Optimism* 24). It is the irreconcilable space between our fantasies of a normatively-defined “good life” and our actual lived experience of a world that is never quite as good as we would hope. So this notion of “being in life without wanting the world” (which is also borrowed from Berlant) refers, essentially, to one’s ability to affirmatively remain in life despite one’s disinterest in or disenfranchisement from the normative objects of attachment that produce the world. It is the ability to affirm your being in life when the “drive to life is met with unsatisfactory objects” (“Living in Ellipsis”). For Berlant, it can be understood as one of two possible methods of escape from the cruelly optimistic relationship between the self and the “spirit of the age”; the other, of course, being suicide. In this light, we can look at Orlando’s resolve to remain in life despite being “done with men” as an implicit rejection of suicide as the only agentive option for someone who is thoroughly disinterested in the world, which allows us to read the second half of the novel as a strategy for actively remaining in life without wanting the world.

It is with this notion in mind that we can come to understand the relative nonchalance of Orlando following her sudden transformation into a woman, as her biographer observes: “The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at all” (103). The anti-climatic shrug with which Orlando accepts her newly feminized body is juxtaposed in contrast with the surreal pageantry with which her transformation is anticipated, with three symbolically-titled sisters (*Our Lady of Purity, -of Chastity, and -of Modesty*) as well as a host of trumpets. A tension quickly emerges between the sisters and the trumpeters, and the sisters are eventually cast from the room at the trumpets’ demands for “truth.” As the three sisters leave, they declare: “It has not always been so! But men want us no longer; the women detest us. We go; we go. I (*Purity says this*) to the hen roost. I (*Chastity says this*) to the still unravished heights of Surrey, I (*Modesty says this*) to any cosy nook where there are curtains in plenty” (101). This overtly dramatic personification of three traditional “womanly” virtues, and their eviction by the trumpets of the biographer’s

own set of “austere Gods” (namely Truth, Candour, and Honesty), serves not only to underscore the constructed and outdated nature of gender-based virtues, but, perhaps more significantly, highlights the problematic nature of constructed notions of gender in the first place. This is to say, Woolf’s self-consciously literary battle between the ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty and the Gods of Truth, Candour, and Honesty establishes a tone that promises to culminate in the revelation of some grand and fundamental truth regarding the nature of womanhood. This suggestion is immediately deflated as Orlando wakes, oblivious to the ladies and trumpets, and the dramatic pomposity of the previous scene is retroactively rendered into an outrageous Chaucerian dream with no actual import into Orlando’s lived experience. In this way, Woolf subtly demonstrates the absurdity of attempting to locate any “truth” in the nature of womanhood: despite the change in her appearance, Orlando remains Orlando.

Although Orlando is largely unfazed by her gender transformation, the same cannot be said of her biographer. Indeed, the biographer’s aversion to transcribing Orlando’s gender transition is made explicit, as she admits, “Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried” (99). With this in mind, we can turn to consider Pamela L. Caughie’s argument that Orlando’s gender fluidity poses a challenge to the entire genre of biography. As Caughie writes, “Transsexual life writing, as other scholars have noted, disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression. It thereby demands a new genre, a transnarrative” (503). In this way, Caughie works to capture the limits of the conventional biographical mode in accounting for the narrative of the transsexual life. By labeling Woolf’s *Orlando* a “transgenre” (502), Caughie points to the inability of conventional language to fully accommodate the nuanced fluidity of Orlando’s gender. This is a limit of which Woolf herself appears to be sensitive, as is evident in Orlando’s biographer’s awkward and self-reflective negotiation of gendered pronouns immediately following Orlando’s transition: “His memory— but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’— her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle” (103). In this passage, Woolf subtly encapsulates where exactly the problem arises in producing the transsexual narrative: although Orlando herself can detect no major disruption in her personal lived experience (as signified by her ability to trace through her own memory “without encountering any obstacle”), it is the biographer, as the figure tasked with translating Orlando’s lived experience into some kind of accessible narrative, who is momentarily unsure how to proceed. This is to say, we can understand the challenge that Orlando’s transsexual narrative poses not as existential but rather syntactical: while Orlando’s existence is altered only superficially, and in a manner that she has little trouble fully accepting, her biographer, in the process of relaying the fluidity of Orlando’s transition, is herself forced to stutter at the limits of “conventional” language. In this way, the reader is forced to acknowledge the tension between the fluidity of the transgendered experience, and the inability of conventional language to express said fluidity. Indeed, pronominally awkward phrases such as “She had collected [bird’s feathers] as a boy” (180) induce for the reader a kind of double take, during which readers are invited to acknowledge that the difficulty of recognizing the transsexual narrative is not a property of the transsexual person, but rather, a problematic feature of our own linguistic

conventions. Woolf's troubling of linguistic convention productively shifts the "problem" of non-normativity away from the non-normative being-in-the-world and toward the world itself.

Indeed, it is only when Orlando is forced into interaction with the world that her gender figures into how her being is constituted. The most compelling example of this is her sudden and seemingly inexplicable inclination, in the nineteenth century, to find a husband. As the biographer explains, "such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age however, that it batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way" (178). As Orlando calls out, "whom... can I lean upon?", her biographer is quick to recognize that "it was not Orlando who spoke, but the spirit of the age" (179). This episode clearly displays Orlando's recognition of the disconnect between "who she is" and "how she relates to the world," but, perhaps more interestingly, suggests the impact of "the spirit of the age" on her personal agency. This is to say, the spirit of the age imposes itself not only through the set of objects toward which its inhabitants tend to be attracted, but also the agential constitution of the inhabitants themselves. Even though Orlando is able to make the distinction between herself and her cultural context, she is still, in this instance, deeply affected by something she knows to be a temporally-bounded construct. Even operating at a distance, the spirit of the age demands conformity from the beings it produces: who Orlando ultimately is, then, emerges as a kind of tangled mess of temporally-bounded selves. To untangle what constitutes a "self" we can turn again to Berlant, who, in her lecture "Living in Ellipsis," suggests that "the individual is a second-order outcome of being-in-relation." This is to say, for Orlando, the "self" that calls out for someone to lean upon might be better understood as the outcome of an interaction between Orlando's female body and the socio-political state of the world: this understanding allows for a more precise definition of "agency" as the resulting set of potential options available to any given body at any given time. Orlando's disassociation from any specific iteration of her "self" allows her to see this for what it is, such that she can recognize that "her" desire for a husband isn't really "her's" at all, but rather, the agential imposition of the cultural norms of the nineteenth century.

To better understand the significance of this realization, we can turn to consider Orlando's conception of agency as similar to the model of "agential realism" advocated by posthuman theorist Karen Barad. To do this, we must first examine the ways in which *Orlando* is a posthuman text. In her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad defines posthumanism as "the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the 'human' and its others are differentially delineated and defined" (136). Similar to Berlant, Barad recognizes the constructed nature of the human "self," and works to account for the apparatuses through which that self emerges. For both Berlant and Barad, the emergence of the self can only be accounted for through a close examination of the context through which it is produced. This is also a well documented feature of Woolf's *Orlando*: as Christy L. Burns points out, in *Orlando*, "Woolf...pits questions of essential selfhood against their social constructedness" (345). As discussed above, the central tension of the novel is exactly this relationship between "world" and "life," as Orlando seeks to define herself against a world with which she never entirely "fits." Crucially, Orlando's "unfitness" suggests that her being-in-the-world is never fully determined by her socio-political environment, such that there is always an indeterminate gap

through which Orlando is able to actively participate in her own self-construction. As Burns goes on to point out, “Woolf’s conception of Orlando’s identity holds within it the possibility for participation in social and self construction. The crucial question of Woolf’s novel becomes that of subjectivity, but subjectivity as it is embroiled in the problematics of historical change and sexuality” (346). In this way, we can understand *Orlando* as a fundamentally posthuman text, in that it is searching to identify both the apparatuses through which human selves are produced, as well as the potential for personal agency within these structural apparatuses.

Just as Orlando endeavours to locate her own agency within the self-producing socio-political structures of the spirit of the age, Barad’s model of “agential realism” works to locate agency without helping itself to a pre-existing or essential notion “the human” as an ontologically distinct being. Instead, following the quantum mechanical physics of Niels Bohr, Barad locates agency as an emergent feature of the intra-action of a unified material field. While it is outside of the scope of this paper to fully capture Bohr’s “philosophy-physics,” the key point, for our purposes, is Bohr’s solution to the paradox of the wave-particle duality. Through his famous “two-slit experiment,” he concludes that what matter is, fundamentally, is a unified, wave-like field, through which “particulate” (or ontologically discrete) arrangements of matter emerge only through measurement within a specific set of apparatuses. The crucial point, here, is that the apparatuses are not fixed, but can be reconfigured to produce entirely new “cuts” in the material field, thus fundamentally reconstituting which objects emerge as distinct. As Barad summarizes, “the nature of the observed phenomenon changes with the corresponding changes in the apparatus” (106). This conclusion is not only a challenge to classic Newtonian physics, but also a challenge to traditional conceptions of the self as a fundamentally distinct ontological entity. With this in mind, the challenge for Barad is to give an account of the human as an emergent feature of the material field as a whole. As she suggests, “Human bodies and human subjects do not pre-exist as such; nor are they mere end products. Humans are neither pure cause nor pure effect but a part of the world in its open-ended becoming” (150).

Agency, then, for Barad, is not a property of individual human bodies, but rather should be understood as an emergent trend through which individual bodies (both human and not) come into being. As she explains, “[i]t is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (139). This is to say, agency *prefigures* the individual entity. Because the apparatuses through which determinate beings emerge are not fundamentally fixed or essential, there is always a gap through which the not-fully-determined individual entity can potentially participate in its own constitution. For a sense of what this might look like in practical terms, we can return to Orlando’s reflections upon her sudden desire to find a husband in the nineteenth century. As her biographer points out:

Orlando had inclined herself naturally to the Elizabethan spirit, to the Restoration spirit, and the spirit of the eighteenth century, and had in consequence scarcely been aware of the change from

one age to another. But the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before (178).

To put Woolf's metaphor in Barad's terms, I am suggesting that while the apparatuses through which the beings of the Elizabethan, Restoration, and eighteenth-century emerge were met with very little resistance from Orlando, the apparatuses that constitute the spirit of the nineteenth century configure her being in such a radically constrained way that she cannot help but resist. As a result of her centuries of periodic solitude and resistance to cultural norms, Orlando is able to clearly identify this resistance not as a feature of her "self," but as a tension between her life and the apparatuses through which her being is iteratively articulated over time. Thus, she is able to identify the agential forces that drive her to pursue a husband as *outside of* her being: by not allowing this agency to authentically act "through" her (as her biographer points out, "the lines of her character were fixed" (178)), she resists the spatio-temporal apparatuses of her age, which she characterizes as a "defeat at its hands."

Agency, then, can be understood as the force that iteratively produces beings (or what Orlando calls her "selves") through time, while what is traditionally thought of as personal agency is more accurately understood as the degree of self-determinacy that can be ascribed to the beings that iteratively emerge through material agency. With this notion in mind, we can understand how Orlando participates in the composition of her self as a non-normative being resistant to the world. In reflecting on her marriage to Shelmerdine, Orlando's biographer admits, "Orlando now performed in spirit...a deep obeisance to the spirit of the age...For she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have to pay the full fine" (196). This is to say, Orlando's marriage can be understood as a kind of normative façade which serves primarily to avert the suspicion of the world with which she is reluctantly forced to interface. This passage offers insight into how exactly Orlando is able to negotiate her own queer being in life with the demands of the spirit of the age: instead of taking every opportunity to actively fight against the normative structures of power, or passively accepting the world that is forced upon her, Orlando finds a kind of middle ground through which she enacts the bare minimum of the age's agential demands. As her biographer explains, "[Orlando] need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself" (196). In this way, Orlando embraces a model of queerness in which she does not shy away from interaction with the world, but rather, engages with it on its own terms, and in doing so, is able to conceal her concealed "contraband" from the normative structures that threaten to take it away. In this way, Orlando is able to participate in the construction of her own being, thus retaining a sense of agential control, only through making certain compromises with the material agential force characterized as the "spirit of the age."

But what is this "contraband" that Orlando needs to keep secret from the spirit of the age? In one sense, it is simply the activity of writing, as Orlando's biographer describes how, after her engagement to Shelmerdine, "[Orlando] could write, and write she did" (196). But, as

discussed above, the activity of writing, for Orlando, is an activity that enables her to distance herself from the world. This is to say, Orlando's "contraband" might better be understood as her ability to withdraw from her specific being-in-the-world, or spatio-temporally-constructed "self" and examine the other "selves" that she has or could occupy. Indeed, this discourse on the nature of Orlando's various "selves" comes to a head in the novel's final pages, as Orlando finds herself alone, seemingly calling out for herself. As the biographer explains, Orlando's solitude enables her once again to distance herself from her iteratively produced "selves," putting her in contact with "what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all" (227). This is to say, each specific self is a temporally-bounded wrinkle or iteration of the "key self," and her biography serves as the apparatus through which each of those selves is iteratively produced and examined. Orlando's distance from the world of attachments allows her to understand this for what it is: the relationally-determined "selves" are the medium through which "her" interaction with the world is enabled, but what "she" is, ultimately, is a kind of echo chamber of the generic life-force through which these manifold "selves" are animated. To put it another way, her being-in-the-world is an iterative feature of the spirit of the age: it is, itself, an artifact of her having lived. The whole construct of the biography, then, is not so much a narrative about any of these iterative selves, but rather an epistemological apparatus for unveiling the production of different kinds of selves through interaction with the world over an extended period of time. In this way, Orlando's "life", like her biography, could be likened to the oak tree: an arborescent network of spatio-temporally unique selves, which, like the leaves of a tree, are unified by their dependence on a central, generic, life-giving node. Orlando's ability to remain in life without wanting the world allows her to trace back these iterative selves to their root, thus allowing her to celebrate her own existence in the raw animating force of life.

In conclusion, Orlando's non-normative being-in-the-world can be understood as a strategy for agentively remaining in life without wanting the world. Her gradual disillusionment with the world of normative attachments enables her to distance herself from the relationally produced "self" through which she interacts with the world, which in turn allows her to produce a private philosophy on the nature of time, gender, and agency. Ultimately, this recognition of agency not as a feature of the individual but rather as an emergent property of the relationship between life and the iteratively enacted world of attachments provides Orlando with the grounds for a new strategy for non-normative being through which she negotiates the superficial demands of the spirit of the age, all the while concealing her unmediated and intimate connection to the generic force of life itself.



## Works Cited

- Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Living in Ellipsis: Biopolitics and the Attachment to Life." *The Affect Conference*. Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg. 18 Sept. 2015. Lecture.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013. Print.
- Burns, Christy L. "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions Between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 40.3 (1994): 342-64. Print.
- Caughie, Pamela L. "The Temporality of Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Einar Wegener's *Man Into Woman*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 59.3 (2013): 501-25. Print.
- Harper, Douglas. "Alive (adj.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=alive>>.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. New York: Harcourt, 2006. Print.