

Spiral Staircases and Cylindrical Pools: The Implosion of "Circular" and "Linear" Gestalts

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In modern German psychology, there is a concept called the gestalt which is useful for this discussion. In it, human beings are viewed as open systems in active interaction with their environment. People naturally organize their perceptions according to certain patterns, which have similar structural properties that influence concepts across the spectrum of human thought (Wikipedia 1). It is essential to use this term when discussing "circular" and "linear" structures of thought, since these seemingly simple terms will come to represent their own individual gestalts, encapsulating multiple binary concepts subsumed and ordered under their respective structuring principles. The author Virginia Woolf provides an ideal springboard to expound upon this, since her novels attempt to encapsulate a fusion of the two structures into a singular, universal gestalt, or structuring principle. In many of her novels, particularly *Orlando* for the sake of this discussion, the goal of this is a synthesis between two different kinds of minds, the rational masculine and the subjective feminine, to produce the harmonized androgynous. This process is created through the synthesis of two different conceptions of time, the linear historical and circular subjective. Finally, the entire new gestalt is illustrated by how the dialectic of circles and lines combine to synthesize a cylinder, a spatial idea which symbolizes how the new androgynous mind articulates itself through time which respectively, as Kant has said, is merely the form of inner sense. Because Woolf's forte is the mind and not the chronicles of realism, actions of the androgynous individual, or how one should express this mind through space, are not discussed. Both space and time are a priori notions (one can only perceive of unfilled space rather than a total absence of space, just as one cannot perceive of something without a place in time), and thus are inherently subjective. So it can be assumed that by forming the androgynous subjective mind, one consequently creates androgynous actions. In other words, this new synthesis Woolf suggests is achieved not merely by adopting actions of androgynous tolerance, but more deeply by perceiving the gendered structures of our mental perception, which extend logically to our notions of time, and fusing them to create an androgynous gestalt.

In Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she calls for the necessity of the "unity of mind" (Room 145), where the mind became androgynous and balanced between both genders. According to the Scholar Nancy Topping Bazin, Woolf thought the masculine mind was mental, rational, and scientific, and knew through apartness, while the female mind was religious and poetic, knowing in terms of togetherness (Bazin 3). The greatest writers were the ones who could harmonize these two types of intelligence, and balance them in their respective expression in prose. Woolf termed the expression of the masculine principle, in terms of narrative, as the shifting element, or the elements of plot that moved forward in linear time. The female principle was the solid, or elements of consciousness that looped back upon each other in the arbitrary space of subjective time. She saw each novel as a moment where both opposites were held in balance. (22-3). This extended to characterization, as well; her novels contained characters who were simultaneously real people and symbolic entities; she tried to balance the world of details (masculine vision of the progressing evanescent) with the world of abstractions (the feminine vision of the circular eternal) (24-6). Though, as was the case with *Orlando* as a narrator, she tended to favor the feminine principles over the masculine, harshly criticizing the "realist" movement in literature and attempting to get at "Structure something lasting that we can know, something solid", that fixes and makes permanent, something that resonates in all people with a Platonic circularity (Bazin 29).

Another way of putting this is found in Woolf's idea of the "design" of her books, or the combination of narrative and characterization, where Woolf visualized "reality" as a permanent shape which exists beneath the constant movement and change inherent in life." (Bazin 16). This reality was the platonic essence of the soul processed by the conscious mind, the "moments of being" that people experience where they see this greater structure, this psychic fabric which underlies their entire existence. In short, this "reality" is an internal one; it is solid, unchanging, religious, feminine, rooted in connection rather than separation. It is conveyed in *Orlando* as the narrator's unchanging personality which exists among the external changes of history, and the expectations and realities of gender. Symbolically, it is the "...pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know...[where] her mind became like a forest in which things moved; lights and shadows changed, one thing became another....[and] she forgot the time..." (323). Though the image only appears after *Orlando* becomes a woman, the image is not an exclusively feminine one. This is because the pool is really in the shape of a cylinder, not a circle, since the pool possesses depth. A cylinder is constructed theoretically by placing lines, the horizontal radius and the vertical height, inside a circle. It is through this structuring principle of linearity that the circle can contain depth, and though it does not contain any visible lines in its final articulation, theoretically it could not exist without them. The pool still contains principles of external, historical progression – movement and change – but this exists outside of objective and inside of subjective time. Yet the result is neither a historical, shifting line of objective time nor a solid, self-referential circle of subjectivity. Instead, it is both; it is the fusion, in time, of the principles of linearity and circularity that Woolf seeks explicitly in the mind. One can see this fusion retrospectively, by looking at how *Orlando* conceived of time before she was able to encapsulate both genders.

Before, as a man, *Orlando* employed the masculine structure of linearity in regards to internal time; he visualizes his internal emotions as "mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain--which was a roomy one" (16). A spiral is essentially a circle with a twisting line intersecting it vertically. Unlike the pool, here the line exists tangibly, and is actually the vehicle by which progress is made. Yet still, the feminine nature lurks in the image, untapped, as the line still operates inside the realm of the circle. Thus, we have seen how shifting, linear, historical, masculine time is fused with solid, circular, feminine, stream of consciousness time throughout the novel's expression. This new conception of time allots for, or perhaps is caused by, a newly androgynous mind. The book ends with "The twelfth stroke of midnight" (329), a particular articulation of historical time, but *Orlando* is not bound by this notion of external, progressive, masculine time. A few pages earlier, "inside the darkness" (327) she sees multiple images from past times, existing inside her psyche with both a sense of progress afforded by the reference of the continually chiming clock, and also the sense of circularity afforded by their rush of simultaneity. She says, "...to see in the pool of the mind now Shakespeare, now a girl in Russian trousers, now a toy boat on the Serpentine, and then the Atlantic itself, where it storms in great waves past Cape Horn" (327). Her ability to juggle both gendered notions of time speaks to her larger ability to fuse together both gendered parts of her mind.

This quest for a harmonious mind, however, is not unique to Woolf. Eastern philosophy associates yin as the masculine and yang as the feminine principle, and eastern medicine believes that balancing these two opposing forces is the key to good health. Western science has established the notion that the left brain functions as a feminine emotional story-teller, while the right brain functions as a masculine analytic and scientific processor. Jung thought that the self was "a point midway between the conscious and unconscious" (Jung 219) where there is a reconciliation of opposites, which he termed the animus and the anima. This movement towards the fusion of male and female, circular and straight constructs of thinking is so prevalent across philosophy for thousands of years that one should hesitate I think to call it an evolving concept. The notion pervades even iconography, with the symbols for men and women containing both circles and a combination of straight lines.

Rather, to borrow another of Woolf's ideas, I think it is a "tunneling" concept, in that different cultures and value systems and structures of thought all find their own ways of articulating what is an essential element of the human psyche, this drive for integration of opposites. Perhaps the proof of this comes from biological origins. Studies have shown that the product of deep meditation and prayer is a greater harmonization between the left and right brain functions, resulting in an excess of alpha-waves (ABC 1). This makes sense given that the desire for such balance underscores many religious and literary philosophies, both activities that seek to transcend the disorder and meaningless of life. Also, recent psychological studies have argued that when manic-depressive patients experience mania, the blood flow is predominantly to their left brain, and when they experience depression, it is to their right brain (ABC 1). The right brain is famously associated with the analytical, unemotional, "masculine" nature while the left is associated with the affective, emotional, "feminine" nature of thought. Thus, it is no surprise that Woolf and other manic-depressives have associated mania with the maternal and depression with the paternal (Bazin 6).

In depression, life seems transitory and disconnected; in mania, life feels eternal and connected. The straight line and circle principles come into play yet again. As in her fiction, Woolf's life was both transitory (ever changing) and whole (never changing) (Bazin 21). It appears that in this case, the duality between male and female does have biological origins, but those of cognition, not those of gender. This is as much an articulation of masculine science as it is of feminine literature; the rigid lines between genders are ultimately imploded, and the reader is left with a spiral formation of time which has no linear progress or circular self-referentiality. Instead, it has a continual ascension into new rational experiences that are always founded upon and encapsulated in the emotional self.

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