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“And the Word was God”:
Rejection, Consideration, and Incorporation of Spiritual
Motivations in Modernist Literature

Honors Program Thesis Project
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Abstract

As existing scholarship demonstrates, the modernist period in literature (during the first half of the twentieth century) is generally considered to be a period marked by rationality, secularity, and persistent atheism. With the technological advances of the 1900's, revolutions in science (such as the work of Charles Darwin), and new political priorities that valued dearly the separation of church and state, it is generally thought that the motifs and commitments of traditional, organized religion were long gone, especially within the literary world. In this project, I set out to demonstrate the ways in which three modernist authors – E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges – reimagine and reincorporate, in their literature, traditional religious motivations. Specifically, I will examine how the “word” of God (exalted in Judeo-Christian doctrine) is utilized and examined by the three authors in order to imagine a new code of significance for language and communication during modernism. With this, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the modernist period was not simply a rejection or forgetting of a more orthodox religious tradition, but a reimagination and relocation of spiritual experience within interpersonal communication and linguistic ecstasy.

Key words

English, literature, modern, modernist, Forster, religion, spiritual, Woolf, narrative, language, Latin-America, Borges, secular, theory, Derrida, authorship, Foucault, Bahktin, Saussure, story, short story, Spanish, twentieth century, Judeo-Christian, Bloomsbury, experience

“I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgement dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards – their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble – the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, “Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.”

– Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?”

A study of religion in literature is by no means a simple feat, nor is it a revolutionary project in the questionably secular 21st century. To simply engage with language, by way of speech or writing, can be considered a fundamentally spiritual or religious experience, which complicates the project of distinguishing intrinsically “religious” texts from literature that purposefully utilizes classical religious motifs (the serpent, the angel, the cross, the apple, and so on, infinitely). Those with more conservative views might consider the proposal of E. M. Forster’s writing as “religious” to be an abhorrent blasphemy. I would respond that in order to arrive at any conclusion regarding the characterization of an artistic period, it becomes necessary to rule out any absolute orientation of perspective. This is particularly true in the case of modernism, a period that is best known for blurring boundaries and existing between lines, breaking rules and transcending binaries.

The modernist literary period of the early 20th century is popularly considered to be secular, formalistic, and agnostic (even atheistic). Most modernist authors would deny that their literature has any traditionally religious motifs or symbols that provide critical or fundamental structure to their narrative. I propose that the appearance of the biblical motif of the “word” of the divine, in forms metaphysical, symbolic, and literal in modernist literature provides evidence

against any inherent “secularity” of this literary period. The use of this image pushes the writings that I will discuss in this project outside of their comfortable realm of objectivity into the underlying reality of religiously motivated literature.

While modernist texts moved away from the overt religious characteristics of previous literary periods, this motif was a remnant of the orthodox underpinnings of Western society, even for the atheistic Virginia Woolf, the agnostic Jorge Luis Borges, and the humanist E. M. Forster. The writings (and authors) deceive themselves to an extent by not rejecting traditional religious narrative, but incorporating it. Instead of turning away from the religious tradition of earlier periods, they demonstrate a radical and deceptive acceptance or incorporation of these themes.

Jorge Luis Borges, not generally considered in discussions of modernism, wrote some of the most poignant examples of this phenomenon. He shares his literary expertise and thematic goals with the more popular, North-American/British white modernists (Forster, Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf). Thus, I would also argue that this widespread, unifying evidence of John 1:1’s “word” of God in modernist literature calls for an emphasis on Latin American literary production as essential to our understanding of modernism. To look further, an analysis of the biblical “Word” leads to an elevated and secondary goal of the present study: an exploration of the ways in which religion is rebranded, reformed, and reincorporated into a new linguistic spirituality. Thus, I will discuss language generally within modernism, how words and communication are endowed spiritual superiority, personified, diminished, and nonetheless empowered throughout the corpus of early twentieth-century literature.

A primary objective of my research is the exploration into religious motivation for these authors and their complex, spiritual literature. I seek not to culminate in any kind of evaluation of these religious motivations (i.e. identification of this phenomenon as positive or negative), but I

do hope to provide evidentiary grounds for an understanding of modernist literature as a corpus of writing woven from the same Judeo-Christian archetypal fabric that is found in modern politics, sociology, philosophy, and infinite other areas. This understanding will allow us to more accurately contextualize the empowered and strange formations of language that are used by the writers of the early twentieth century, radically redefining language as the religion of the modernist author.

In order to make this argument, I will first give: a summary of the general perception of literary modernism and an overview of the existing scholarship regarding religion in modernism, an explication of the vocabulary and processes that I will be using to analyze the texts, and an outline of the relationship between the three main subjects of my study. I will then move towards an examination of the work and beliefs of E. M. Forster, particularly one motif that appears in his novel *A Passage to India*. Demonstrating a similar but variant motif in the texts of “Kew Gardens,” *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Voyage Out* by Virginia Woolf, I will study how the texts reaffirm a sense of spirituality while strictly denying traditional religion. At this point, I will turn to the work of Jorge Luis Borges, examining specifically the story “The Writing of the God” and a particularly Borgesian analysis of Judeo-Christian religion and spirituality, incorporating into the study a sample of Latin American literary modernism. I will conclude by considering the implications of my study in consideration with other religious motifs, various other modernist (and later postmodern authors, and how we might move forward in our understanding of modernist spirituality within a larger timeline of literary production.

The period in literature during the early to middle of the 20th century is well established as a fundamentally secular period. Thomas E. Lyon summarizes this succinctly in first sentences

of his paper “Altars behind Writers: An Inquiry into the Role of Religion in Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature,” citing Charles Glicksberg:

In a century often viewed as secular, with post-modernism denying absolutes and sure boundaries, with God pronounced dead and existential angst reigning in his stead, where science and reason are expected to explain and resolve major world problems, “the religious conscience [in literature] seems to have largely disappeared.” [Glicksberg 188]

With post-modernism as the locus for most of the anti-religious thought during the twentieth century, we can identify the modernist period as a thematic preparation for the later deconstructed questions of structure, reality, and logic. Lyon, then, establishes the most essential context for the present study as he cites a lack of absolutes and boundaries within almost all fields of academic pursuit during the twentieth century. Modernism, in the most basic sense, appears to the contemporary scholar as treating irrevocably atheistic concerns (the painfully nihilistic plotlines of Forster’s novels and short stories, Woolf’s self-proclaimed denial of religion) as it moves in the perceived opposite direction of past romantic and enlightenment thought. With the cultural apex of humanism, darwinism, and scientific rationality from the late 1800’s to the early 1900’s, modernism appears as an entirely separate entity from the past realities of literature. Woelfel agrees with this sentiment and provides more evidence establishing modernism as inherently secular: “Historically modernity is equated with wholesale religious loss, and secularity with unbelief and the facile theory of a search for surrogates” (26). This search for surrogates, as we will see, generally complicates the issue of religion in modernism, posing constant questions regarding the significance of spiritual or religious symbols and versification within literature. There are various influences for literary production in the twentieth century that further fortify this proposal: “Marxism, scientific humanism, studies of

comparative mythology, two tragic world wars, Freudian psychology, genetic determinism” (Lyon 1-2), which all result in a logical, deeply rational objectivity in literary study and interpretation.

A particular point in the conversation regarding these “two tragic world wars” are the agonizingly realistic verses of Great War literature during the 1910’s and 1920’s, such as the images from “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen. Owen narrates the experience of watching a fellow soldier in the first World War die due to exposure to mustard gas: “His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;/If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood/Come gargling from froth-corrupted lungs,/obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud/Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.” The first verse of the poetic description seems to mock traditional, Christian, sacrifice-glorifying religion, the simile “like a devil’s sick of sin” denies the holy, sanctified substratum of past religious experience by depicting the devil suffocating on the cruelties of war, his body diseased and made evil and corrupt from innocence, as mentioned in the final verse of the excerpt. Similar descriptions permeate other poetic accounts of the Great War period. If this corpus of literature proposes any kind of thematic precedent, it is a lack of faith: in country, in man, and especially in God.

I believe that the argument about Latin American modernism made by Thomas E. Lyon can be extrapolated to analyze the larger tradition of religion in modernism. The discussion outlined in Lyon’s 1994 paper sets out to discover or explicate the sense of religion that is found specifically in the corpus of twentieth-century Latin American literature. We are brought to the conclusion, continually, that religion was not rejected, but incorporated into Latin American literature during this period. Lyon explains religious history in the region and outlines some of the symbolism and “avatars” (1) that are used by authors such as Borges, Martí, and Rulfo. He

cites the words of the famous biologist Sir E. O. Wilson, an assumption which forms much of the basis for my study: “In *On Human Nature*, [E. O. Wilson] affirms that religion and spiritual rites have tended to perpetuate themselves in all societies and cannot be legislated or easily intellectualized away” (3). While popular media and cultural production has, in modernity, departed greatly from the doctrine and orthodox of religion in a movement towards rationality, the inspiration for my study was the (both academic and personal) realization that anthropologically, it is difficult to retreat entirely from the historically Christian establishment of society, both Western and otherwise. This conclusion arises not only from the plain fact that much of the world was colonized by Christian-fueled exploration, but also from the wholesale erasure, denial, and destruction of other cultural-religious traditions.

Some scholars have an unequivocally negative opinion of the critics that seek to detach modernist literature from religion, making up one “side” of an argument whose “sides” number into the hundreds. A representational perspective from René Girard is discussed in Lyon’s conclusion. The quotation is part of an interview that Girard gave, cited in an article by *Stanford Magazine*.

“I think that the very notion of the humanities is at stake today because of this insistence that they not be touched by religion or science,” he said in an interview with author Millicent Dillon in 1981. “That’s why I think the humanities are withering on the vine. Of course, if I say things like this, it’s terrifying to most people because you question all the categories. I think we live in a prudent world, but I like to take risks.”

Lyon concludes that while this assertion encapsulates the experience of some literary production, Girard’s statement is uniquely relevant to an analysis of the corpus of Latin American modernist literature. While my later discussion of the literature of Jorge Luis Borges may align with Lyon’s

conclusion, I also look to demonstrate the ways in which religion (or at least spirituality) emerge in the works of other modernist authors, not only those in the regions of Latin America. On the whole, Lyon and Girard ultimately advocate for an understanding of literary modernism that has its foundation in synthesis, rather than schism, between religion and science, religion and culture, religion and literature. As I will explain, this synthesizing argument is shared by other scholars that write on this particular subject.

Perhaps the most concise summary of the various modes of thought regarding religious belief in modernism comes from Craig Bradshaw Woelfel in his 2012 paper entitled “Stopping at the Stone: Rethinking Belief (and Non-Belief) in Modernism Via ‘A Passage to India.’” The scholarship is most notable for its condemnation of any scholar attempting to bend modernist causes to fit their own conclusions, denouncing the effort to read modernist work (specifically, that of E. M. Forster) as existing in some sort of “binary opposition” (Woelfel 31) strictly between religious and secular. Woelfel summarizes this sentiment, demonstrating the negative effect of binary understandings regarding the discussion.

Recent debates about the secularization of the West, primarily in religious studies and sociology, have challenged the narrative of secularity behind such understandings, the net result of which has been a destabilization of any simple opposition between modernity and secularity, or belief and unbelief in modernity. (34)

The prominent exemplary scholar that Woelfel cites here as responsible for such damaging “destabilization” is Michael Roschlein, whose slightly reductive “either/or” (33) approach to *A Passage to India* asks the question: “Does the novel's skepticism preclude a positive religious position, or does the novel advocate mysticism?” (Woelfel 32). We are informed (I think, correctly) that “such an understanding fails to truly account for the complexity of religious

engagement in modernity” (34). As is the case with so many other thematic moments and trends of modernism, previous analyses of the communication with religious tradition of modernist authors is ambiguous and nonbinary: the period’s religious engagement is neither positive nor negative, but significant nonetheless. Woelfel cites Charles Taylor as providing the ideal basis for a revolutionized understanding of religious dynamics in modernism: “Taylor’s work is significant in that, rather than rejecting the broad understanding that modernity has become secular, he argues that modernity is definitively secular but that this nevertheless ought not to make us exclude religion from the picture” (34). This exemplifies my earlier statement and provides credence to the basis upon which my analysis will operate: that modernism is most fundamentally defined as existing between the lines of definitive identification, in the midst of binary opposites, growing as a corpus of literature within a profoundly grey thematic space.

Thus, while modernism has been understood for years to engender a literary rejection of traditional religion, the present study in no way claims to be the first of its kind. Lyon, Woelfel, Girard, Wilson, Roschlein, and Taylor (and infinite others) have arrived at the general conclusion that while there may be two sides to the great argument surrounding spiritual modernism (secular or non-secular, religious or scientific, positive or negative markers of religion), the two sides may persist as irreconcilable, and the ongoing conflict is quite possibly irrelevant. As I examine the motif of the religious Word and move from this basic image outwards, looking at modernist spirituality as fundamentally based within theories and new understandings of language and communication, I build from an immense corpus of preexisting scholarship regarding this question.

At this point it becomes pertinent to explicate (to a limited extent) the terminology and semantic processes that I will be utilizing throughout the present study, as well as the relationship

between some of the many religious elements that I will reference. I will also elucidate, as much as is possible, how I am distinguishing between the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” as the difference is critical to my argument.

Religion is a unification or synthesis, while science (or: the rationality, logic, empiricism of the modernist period) is a schism, or the action of dissection to achieve knowledge. Religious unification involves the binding of human to divine, the understanding that permeates all religious culture is that aspects of the divine God are reflected or contained within each individual worshipper. As each part of a fractal shows an image of the whole, the concept of panentheism (originating in Hinduism) describes each individual as expressive of the divine. This metaphysical synthesis or unification (that relies entirely on its opposition with the “cutting” action of scientific thought) is characterized, indicated, and summarized by the Word: Om, or Aum, or Aoum.

The divine word of “Om” can also be thought of in terms of its primacy: relating to “Aleph” in Hebrew, the letter “A” in English, “Alpha” in Greek. It is the sound of the open throat, with uninterrupted air, or “holy” spirit (from “respiration”) flowing through the body. “Om” cultivates the divine within the human soul. The passage “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3) is critical to the present definition of the Word. God’s biblical ability to create is causally attached to the speech actions that he performs in Genesis, during which he is creating the universe. John 1:1, the infinitely representative passage upon which I plan to hinge my argument, provides the most clear explanation for this process of linguistic creation: “the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

To synthesize another critical concept within this history, we can look at the findings of physicists surrounding the universe, and reference the fact that sound and light are inherently

related in our understanding of the inner workings of life. The Word (that *is* God and is simultaneously *with* God) is a sound, which allows there to be light in the universe through the action of creation. The act of creation, in our physical, scientific universe and in the religious universe, is initiated with a sound. This proposal, that language advances or generates the world as we know it, allows us to understand that all life retains an undercurrent of divinity, especially when signified by the air from our lungs: as we speak (and, to an extent, as we write – I will go over Derrida’s argument regarding this assumption shortly), we are actively creating reality. God, and the biblical Word, are able to persist among our perception of reality, as an undercurrent of life. Perhaps even more critically, the Word of the divine (Om) makes a connection between the human and the divine. Not only is divine presence latent within the physical universe through the synthesis of sound and light, it is also present within the soul of each human being. This is the importance of John’s described “Word of God.” When I reference the Word (conceptual) within the present examination, this religious and metaphysical background is the understanding from which I make my argument, based upon a multi-religion understanding of linguistic creation.

To clarify my use of “spirituality” versus “religion” in this project, I will simply state what I believe to be the most common definitions of these terms so that their meaning is plain and does not need to be intuited throughout the study. I will refer to spirituality when I am signaling a belief in the existential presence of the soul (spirit) of a human, as an individual creed or personal system of faith. On the other hand, I will use religion to refer to an organized system of belief that is shared by a community or specific group of people. Spirituality will refer to an often amorphous system of faith, with a low level of regulation, that may change, develop, or wane over time, applicable to many powers, and attributable to many organic and inorganic beings. Religion will reference a more long-lasting phenomenon that transcends individual faith,

often including doctrine, specific regulated rituals or traditions, and often a sense of political or cultural “state.”

A critical component of my project lies in the fact that E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges were not in any way alienated from each other, but were contemporaries during their time and had quite a few social and scholarly connections between one another. To start, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf had the well-known connection of the left-wing Bloomsbury group (a connection which in turn, proves their relatedness to various other modernist authors and scholars, and situates them firmly within the norms of the period and of the group). Both authors knew each other closely as budding novelists, critics, and friends. Hoffman and Ter Haar write about this in their review of the literary and personal relationship between the two.

By 1930 this literary friendship had continued for more than two decades and was characterized by the kind of edginess that often marks the relationships of highly competitive artists... comments, written when both writers were well-launched as established novelists and public figures, give some indication of the complex literary friendship that goaded and nourished both writers. (46)

Quite apart from Borges (indeed, operating mainly on an entirely different continent), Forster and Woolf had a well-established dynamic. Hoffmann and Ter Haar go on to discuss extensively the influence that the two writers had on one another's work (specifically, the similarities between Forster's *Howards End* and Woolf's *The Waves*), but little evidence is needed to provide a basis for the fact of the shared atmosphere for the two writers. Operating from a similar spiritual playbook, the two authors are assumed to have discussed religion (and like many of the

members of Bloomsbury, they did not take a liking to it), a fact which is important to understand when characterizing this particular development in modernism.

Borges, then, becomes a slightly alienated figure in relation to the close professional and personal friendship between two members of the Bloomsbury group. While he was deeply influenced by the European literary tradition of modernism, Borges wrote and operated in Argentina, described as “another literary planet” by Andrew Hurley (Ayuso 242). His stories encompass themes and language that are culturally Latin American, often incorporating elements of ancient South American culture, rituals, and spiritual tradition. Nonetheless, he translated two of Woolf’s novels, *A Room of One’s Own* and *Orlando: A Biography* (the translated versions are *Un Cuarto Propio* and *Orlando: Una Biografía*). Ayuso writes that “these were the standard translations in Spanish of Virginia Woolf’s work through the mid-twentieth-century” (242). Indeed, Borges seemed to be a fan of Woolf’s writing, in a general sense.

He calls Woolf’s imagination and mind among the most sensitive of the English experimentalists and *Orlando* an extremely original novel; he describes its prose as musical not only on account of its language but of the novel’s structure which isolates certain motifs that combine and recur. (Ayuso 243)

While Borges may have been outside of the Bloomsbury echo chamber in London, he was very much in tune with the motifs, themes, and images present in the work of Virginia Woolf (and, likely, E. M. Forster). The profound attention to detail that is required during the process of translating a piece of literature demanded that Borges notice and analyze every dynamic moment in the language of Woolf’s novels. And perhaps most importantly, throughout his years as a literary translator for the literary magazine *Sur* he was also creating his own stories: most notably the one that will appear later in my analysis, which was written in 1949, long after his initial

contact with Woolf. It is critical to understand that the relationship between the texts that will be discussed throughout this project is not present outside of time and period, but exists precisely because of the almost suffocating proximity between the subjects of our study. With this orientation of period, person, and theme in place, we will move to explore the spiritual dynamism and complex religious affinities of Forster's *A Passage to India*.

First: no critical reading of E. M. Forster's work would impress upon the reader any lasting sense of religious fervor or worship, at least not in a manner that claims primacy over the other symbols and themes that are interwoven in his publications. Additionally, it does not require any deep analysis of Forster's life and personal philosophies to find that the author himself was not very deeply religious, in his personal creed entitled "What I Believe," he questions traditional religious faith, develops a personal evaluation of psychoanalytic theory, and devalues the Judeo-Christian religious system: "No millenium seems likely to descend upon humanity; no form of Christianity and no alternative to Christianity will bring peace to the world or integrity to the individual; no 'change of heart' will occur" (Forster 5). His religious faith was lost quickly and quietly during his time at King's College, Cambridge, and he seemed to retain this belief (or lack thereof) throughout the rest of his life. This being said, it is not necessarily a unique analysis to claim that Forster's writing is based in a critical sense of spirituality, especially in *A Passage to India*. To turn back to his personal creed, he continues: "And yet we need not despair, indeed, we cannot despair; the evidence of history shows us that men have always insisted on behaving creatively under the shadow of the sword; that they have done their

artistic and scientific and domestic stuff for the sake of doing it” (5). Forster, then, has a clear faith that remains outside of the realm of Orthodox Christianity and the worship of a God (very similar, as we will examine presently, to the beliefs of Jorge Luis Borges). This being said, *A Passage to India* is evidently founded upon Forster’s interest in the Hindu religion, a tradition with which he was fascinated, especially in its opposition to the Judeo-Christian doctrine.

We must then decide upon the ways in which E. M. Forster’s sense of modernism is relevant to our study. Forster’s sense of modernism within many of his writings is unique, if it exists at all. Randall Stevenson argues that specifically in *A Passage to India*, Forster seems to emerge as something resembling a modernist writer. He begins his review of “Forster and modernism” with the bold statement “Forster was scarcely a modernist” (209), later softening this approach by explaining that the author “developed a late version of the Romantic vision which initially resisted pressures of modernity and industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (211). Stevenson asserts that while Forster may have engaged with romantic themes of the human spirit and fantastical scenery, his inexorably modernist writing emerged only in *A Passage to India*, in which he delves much more analytically into the realm of metaphysics and spirituality.

A Passage to India thus moves decisively beyond the habitual concern with ‘muddle’, emotional or interpersonal, which dominates Forster’s early fiction, and towards more wide-ranging concerns with ‘mystery’ – with perplexities pervasive both within the human sphere, and in its relation with what lies beyond. These focus on the Marabar Caves, a context both for immediate mystery, in Adela Quested’s unexplained encounter, and for Forster’s wider vision of a universe with ultimate nullity: one existing out-with consciousness and its powers of assimilation; outside human orders of language, logic,

and reason. This is in many ways a modernist vision, widely shared by authors discussed above [Proust, Stein, Richardson, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, and others (215)]. (216)

The oft-romantic Forster thus reveals himself (at least in this later, post-war novel) to be somewhat of a modernist, wherein his socially revelatory “muddle” becomes a much deeper, spiritual mystery, philosophizing regarding what Stevenson refers to as “beyond.” The claim is substantiated by textual evidence, in which Aziz observes the Marabar Hills receding into the landscape, “the grim untidy plain, the frantic and feeble movements of the buckets, the white shrines, the shallow graves” (Forster 176). The spiritual diction of “shrines” and “graves” provides evidence for Stevenson’s assertion that there exists some meaning in *A Passage to India* that may be religious in the most ambiguous, modernist sense of the word.

This being said, Stevenson seems to propose a question or discussion regarding this classification of *A Passage* as modernist or otherwise. “Critics who claim *A Passage to India* as a modernist text inevitably concentrate less on its overall form and style than on more particular tactics and tropes... each device is regularly present in conventional narrative” (217). He writes that Peter Childs attempts to make the identification on the basis of “rhythm,” which “might be a fundamental component of all narratives, not only modernist ones” (217). If Randall Stevenson proposes the question of “Is it possible to classify *A Passage to India* as a modernist text based on something that is not present in a conventional narrative?” then I would argue that I can provide a rhetorically sound basis of classification. The novel contains the primary motif of the sound that permeates the Marabar Caves, the mysterious echo heard by those who enter, the sound of “Boum.” This sound is meditative, echoing, repeating, multiplying: “The echo in a Marabar cave is not like these, it is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof”

(Forster 163). Forster references, possibly unintentionally, the philosophical concept of the Word of God, *logos spermatikos*, or the holy word of creation that is written about in John 1:1.

The most salient section of the novel (with regards to the present study) comes in the fourteenth chapter of the book, in which Aziz takes Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore to visit the mysterious Marabar caves. After an intensely traumatizing experience within the first cave, Mrs. Moore sits out on the adventure to think about the reality of the location.

There are some exquisite echoes in India; there is the whisper round the dome at Bijapur; there are the long, solid sentences that voyage through the air at Mandu, and return unbroken to their creator. The echo in a Marabar cave is not like these, it is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. ‘Boum’ is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or ‘bo-oum,’ or ‘ou-boum,’ – utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce ‘boum.’ (163)

Though India itself and various geographic locations within the country are mentioned at the beginning, Mrs. Moore is mystified by the uniqueness of the Marabar echo, the sublime “bo-oum” or “ou-boum” that she heard deep in the cave. The natural explanation for the phenomenon is clear: caves do make a kind of noise, usually a rushing sound from the surrounding earth or the echoes of footsteps and water dripping. These sounds may encompass the kind of echo that Mrs. Moore is describing here (a rushing, general cacophony of life both organic and inorganic that surrounds the whole, populated world). To consider the echo realistically in this way gives Forster’s prose a refreshed sense of beauty, and provides an added sensory reality to the experience of his writing. To continue, the “ou-boum” or “boum” sound is fairly easily connected to the meditative sound “Om.” As mentioned previously in the

introduction, the meditation of “Om,” the holy syllable in Hinduism, represents and cultivates the divine within each human being. It is then fairly easily concluded that Forster intended to recall the primary “holy” word of Hinduism, the meditative syllable used to bring the human closer to the divine, especially considering his wholesale subscription to Eastern religion after his visits to India.

We see this in other moments throughout this particular chapter. In describing the noise made by a distant train, Forster writes: “Its message – for it has one – avoided [Mrs. Moore’s] well-equipped mind” (150), and continues to personify the nation of India, writing that “She calls ‘Come’ through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august,” (150). The echo, the rushing noise of the caves that absorbs every sound and utterance within it is also the noise made by the train that conveys the group to the caves, and is spoken by the metaphysical mouth of the Indian nation. Not only does Forster communicate the sound as a natural meditation or the natural echo of a location, the same echo expresses the spiritual synthesis of a whole nation, the undoubtedly religious connection between all of the humans (British and Indian) in his novel, all of the members of humanity. The world of Forster’s novel is united under the holy syllable, the word “Om” that forms a connection with the Judeo-Christian Word of creation that was spoken by the Old Testament God, “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). This observation is made increasingly complex with the integration of the “logos spermatikos,” and Forster’s interesting analysis of the state of language and meaning within the Marabar echo.

This chapter of the text also engages with the metaphysical conception of language as analyzed by Jacques Derrida: specifically the understanding of presence and absence in regards to writing and speech. Much of the chapter has to do with sound, silence, and the dynamic

between these two states. As the caravan of villagers and animals moves towards the Marabar hills, the world seems to be silent, or at the very least engaging in the denial of the presence of sound, actively creating absence. “As the elephant moved towards the hills... a new quality occurred, a spiritual silence which invaded more senses than the ear. Life went on as usual, but had no consequences, that is to say, sounds did not echo or thoughts develop. Everything seemed cut off at its root, and therefore infected with illusion” (154-155). Forster establishes here a very Derridean absence of sound and thought, which begins away from the caves. The element of “spiritual silence” in this passage begs elaboration, as it refers to a larger theme that Forster is exploring in the novel. Western society has been built upon the fundamental connection between the word of God and truth, as the spoken word of God forms the underpinning for Christian church services, the history of the Old Testament, and many other elements of Judeo-Christianity. The absence of sound that is experienced by the caravan of travelers, British and Indian alike, prepares a scene in the countryside that is uninhabited, devoid of sound, and by implication, devoid of profound meaning. The trek towards the Marabar hills dons a sense of unreality, becoming an illusion. In these silent moments, Forster obliterates that connection between the word of God and truth, demolishing a value that is fundamental to Western philosophy – an assumption of presence, as Derrida may call it. This assumed presence or connection is then diverted, or devalued, through the reinforced absence.

As the narrative zeroes in on the events inside of the cave and the internal thoughts of Mrs. Moore, Forster adopts a metaphysical tone towards the concept of language, the written word. “The crush and smells [Mrs. Moore] could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, ‘Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so

is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value” (165). This seems to reflect and simultaneously reject the theory of linguistics designed by Ferdinand de Saussure, in which the spoken or written word is a signifier, which represents the intangible meaning of the tangible representation, the signified. Forster writes that the echo in the Marabar caves informs Mrs. Moore that “Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical,” and that they are also identical to “filth.” All of these written words that boast diverse definitions are different signifiers that refer to the same signified, none of which “have value,” which might be immediately read as a cynical, nihilistic renunciation of this divine or spiritual echo entirely. I will discuss presently why this may not be the most accurate conclusion. Nonetheless, we see that Saussure’s understanding of the strict relationship of difference between signifier and signified is examined by Forster, the same issue about which Derrida has some suspicions – the Derridan rejection of binary thinking within language does not play nicely with the signified/signifier relationship. Binarism is similarly rejected in this excerpt from *A Passage*.

In the caves, the return of sound in “boum” is a definitive presence after the silence of the journey to the Marabar hills. It seems as though the “spiritual silence” can only be followed by an equally spiritual sound, the rushing echo of the mysterious caves. Here, we see that connection between the word of God and the divine truth reestablished, reflecting the biblical motif of John 1:1. A text as modern as *A Passage to India* by Forster speaks with a canonical biblical tradition – even if the divine truth that has been reconnected only speaks of cynicism and an overwhelming sense of dread. If speech, the spoken word, carried full presence for Derrida, the logos of the Marabar echo must represent an absolute unity of word with thought, a complete moment of presence within the novel. The phrase “only amounted to Boum” seems to be a diminution, but it is not. In writing the phrase “poor little talkative Christianity” (166), Forster

(the famous nihilist) does not intend to devalue the word of God (“Boum”), but to reimagine it as a product of a universal sense of spirituality that persists even throughout the scientific, rational modes of modernism. This literary portrayal instead elevates the sound of divinity. Mrs. Moore and Forster may not be rejecting “poor little talkative Christianity,” instead asserting that the echo summarizes the tradition, maybe as a sort of spiritual culmination, maybe empowering religion by incorporating it into a modernist literary corpus.

There is continued debate, of course, around the significance (or lack thereof) of this spiritual engagement that we see in *A Passage to India*. To this point, Craig Bradshaw Woelfel expresses the argument that critics need not argue around a religious binary within modernism, asserting that Forster was “for” or “against” religion. Woelfel asserts that “religious and secular frames are not mutually exclusive strands” (28), and that “such an approach reflects a naïve conception of the relationship between secular modes of understanding” (31). Friedman writes that “Rather than insisting that religious language be translated in the language of rationality, [Forster] describes the sense of a unifying spiritual force underlying daily life, the ‘touch of mysticism’ and ‘sense of the unseen’” (29), demonstrating that Forster believed in an incorporation of spiritual belief within the secular world. I would go further and affirm that this incorporation does not only involve a “touch of mysticism,” but communicates with an image taken directly from the forms and doctrines of ancient religion, demonstrating the modernist Forster’s subscription (willing or unwilling, knowing or unknowing) to the fundamental Word of many religious traditions. Forster’s use of religious symbolism and imagery may not need to be evaluated as a purely secular and humanist rejection, or a written engagement with the romantic spirituality of past epochs, but may exist in a duality or literary synthesis within the text. Forster’s modernism, at its most essential, lives between the traditional boundaries between the

contemporary and the ancient, the motif of the “Boum” situating the story within the context of a new literary mode regarding religious belief. Incorporation and reimagination of religion is not a position *for* or *against* secularism, but a synthesis (recalling the etymology of the word religion that was mentioned in the introduction: the sense of binding, bringing together) of modernity and antiquity.

In this way, we can understand Forster’s modernism (and the larger modernist experience) as existing between many binary groups: signified and signifier, modernity and antiquity, secularism and religion. By this aforementioned evidence, our analysis can return once again to Derrida’s rejection of Western, binary thought. Woelfel’s discussion of literary critics and their polarity on this issue within Forster’s literature supports an increasingly Derridean understanding of the text, that *A Passage to India* and the larger period of modernism portray a sort of religion that exists outside of the binary logic upon which previous artistic and literary periods rested. The biblical motif of the Word of god in *A Passage*, the divine *logos* of the Marabar caves, calls into question the strict secularism of the period, requiring an analysis of religious modernism to go beyond the black and white classifications of rationality and into the space between, or beyond, essential boundaries of categorization. Woelfel provides an incredibly succinct summary of this argument in his discussion.

Not only is a genuine but partial position possible, but various pressures that might fall on either side of the religious or secular divide can present themselves in varying strengths over time without being resolved altogether. This suggests a means of understanding modern religious engagement in concord with our ubiquitous understanding of modern, fragmented subjectivity. This notion of subjectivity has not yet been incorporated into our

thinking about religion, which remains linear and coherent; in other words, pre-modern.
(36)

Most overviews of Virginia Woolf's life and writing gloss over the intricacies of her personal religious values. Countless critics, students, and teachers read her characterization of Mr. Bax in *The Voyage Out* and Miss Kilman's sad christianity in *Mrs. Dalloway* and simply wrote her off as a scholarly atheist (as many in the Bloomsbury group were characterized). Indeed, she was surrounded at Bloomsbury by "G. E. Moore, J. M. E. McTaggart, and Bertrand Russell... particularly prominent academic atheists in England," (Sherman 717). It is critical to a study of Woolf's literature to understand that her religious belief system was not as simple as common knowledge would make it seem – in fact, many of her texts have the goal of questioning and exploring religion rather than rejecting it, and I am inclined to assert that Woolf desired to understand religion, not simply reject it. David Sherman outlines the case of Woolf's novels and their relative secularism by proposing a similar solution as Craig Woelfel (explained in the introductory section of this study).

Considered in these terms, a secular age is not a break with a religious or "enchanted" one, not a historical rupture and renewal that makes religion obsolete, but a complex and tense knotting together of religion and non-religion, enchantment and disenchantment, across individuals, families, communities, and nations... [Woolf's] literary experiments articulate this complex knotting together, this intricate entanglement of the secular.
(Sherman 714)

Instead of representing her personal beliefs and the modernist characteristics of her literature as secular and entirely removed from religious tradition, we must examine how religious tradition

might be reimagined or reincorporated into a modern society that is increasingly based in rationalism and logic. Momentarily, I will provide evidence towards the proposal that this “knotting together” is performed through the use of language, similar to the operations carried out in Forster’s *A Passage to India*. For Woolf, her manipulation of language to convey spirituality (both individual spirituality and a much larger, collective undercurrent of spirit) often took the form of the personification of language: spoken and, less often, written words, sentences and phrases, and more abstract ideas that are conveyed through language. Admittedly, Woolf’s utilization of language does not adhere to the concept of *logos spermatikos* as much as Forster’s novel does (and as we will see, as Borges’s story does). Nonetheless, her empowerment of language and imagination of words as physical or organic tools of humanity gives a spiritual tonality to her writing, entangling two previously disparate (for the most part) strands of belief: religion and secularism.

While Woolf is best known for her novelistic production, her short story “Kew Gardens” employs the relevant motif extensively in the personification and empowerment of words. The idyllic description of a scene in one of the gardens of London is a picturesque snapshot of Woolf’s style of writing. Her relationship with and understanding of language is characterized by her personification of words in this story, establishing them as at once cumbersome and insignificant. The story depicts various pairs of people walking through the lush Kew Gardens in London, and Woolf carefully describes their communication and voices, playing with and emphasizing the importance of voice and sound in human connection: “Nell, Bert, Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says... The ponderous woman looked through the pattern of the falling words at the flowers standing cool, firm, and upright in the earth, with a curious expression.” While the flowers in the gardens are depicted as permanent and

monumental, the words that the woman sees falling through the air become transient and fleeting in comparison. Later, the words “fall over her,” cascading down her body as if they were fluid, encompassing the woman in her relative insignificance like rain, an ancient marker of the natural world. With these figurative expressions, Woolf questions the permanence and efficacy of language in human communication. Later, a young couple chats in the gardens, and the motif of empowered language appears once again:

The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way, as these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them, and were to their inexperienced touch so massive; but who knows (so they thought as they pressed the parasol into the earth) what precipices aren't concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine in the sun on the other side? Who knows? Who has ever seen this before?
(Woolf)

Again, the language used by the young, romantic pair appears to maintain two detached elements: the language itself is separate from the meaning, which Woolf personifies by describing a “heavy body” of signification. Most importantly, the act of communication between the two individuals is awkward, and ultimately a failure – nothing of substance is communicated between them, which allows for this silence in which their words can hang, fly, and fall dejectedly to the earth. Indeed, language does not succeed in any moment of the narration. Simon and Eleanor never fully understand what the other person is truly thinking of, because they are interrupted by each other and their preoccupation with their children. William does not understand his older companion, who “talked almost incessantly,” and the ponderous woman has

no idea what the two elderly women are talking about (the reader gets the idea that even they may not be communicating with each other, as their dialogue is unintelligible, nothing more than gibberish). This miscommunication or lack of understanding between characters is something that Woolf works with in many of her novels, but for the sake of brevity, I will limit my evidence to these examples from “Kew Gardens.”

This brings us to a primary purpose of Woolf’s strange employment of language in this story (and in her other texts): the allusion to or implication of a sense of spirituality. The words of the young couple are described as a strange, foreign landscape (“who knows... what precipices aren’t concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don’t shine in the sun on the other side? Who knows?”), with an emphasis on the unknown quality of the language. The story is littered with these detached words that float without signification around a cast of vague characters, and the brief plot shows a group of people talking incessantly in the hopes of discovering, or maybe stumbling upon, a sense of *purpose* in their words. Woolf’s language and her empowered words imply a search for meaning that is, at the core, spiritual in nature. As an agnostic admits their lack of knowledge about the divine, Woolf’s characters search for meaning behind the spoken word – implying a new sense of modernist spirituality based in language.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf performs the same figurative operation with words as she does in “Kew Gardens.” The words of a letter are described in a sublime expression: “Instead of seeming vague as ghosts, each word was astonishingly prominent; they came out as the tops of mountains come through a mist” (139). The voice of a character becomes so distant that it is almost meaningless: “They could hear Mr. Flushing flowing on, now talking about his wife, now about art, now about the future of the country, little meaningless words floating high in air” (322). Rachel and Terence’s awkward engagement scene is again accompanied by the

superfluous trappings of language: “To speak or to be silent was equally an effort, for when they were silent they were keenly conscious of each other’s presence, and yet words were either too trivial or too large” (327). Indeed, we can see that Woolf continues to write a text that is centered around language, the infinite powers of words, and the ultimate failures of communication experienced by her characters. Words are generally meaningless or insufficient in the novel, but they are almost as often too large, unwieldy, inappropriate for the circumstances. After all, Rachel’s literary preferences and the true nature of her person do, in fact, end up being too large to be confessed, in such a violent shortcoming that she must convalesce and die before her life (and character arc) can be completed, before her mind can be known to the men of the novel and the reader of the text. It should also be mentioned that throughout the novel, Ridley Ambrose spends his days pent up in a study, surrounded by books, writing a novel “which was to be called ‘Silence, or the Things People don’t say’” (255-256). Fundamentally, *The Voyage Out* is established, in these instances, as a novel that closely regards the nature and complexities of language.

The critical moment regarding language in *The Voyage Out* comes during the church scene in chapter seventeen, in which many of the characters in the novel attend a church service given by the pastor, Mr. Bax. Described as a “stout black figure” (261) twice, the small and obscure character of Mr. Bax reads out passages from the New Testament. While Woolf does all that she can to disrupt the ethos of the church, she nonetheless lauds the versatility of the word of Christ, writing that “as they were all different, some practical, some ambitious... they did very different things with the word” (264). Rachel’s time in the church seems to be her first time truly listening to the words of the pastor, the words of her religious faith. As in the strange,

universalizing atmosphere of Kew Gardens, language is once again a literary symbol of the great unknown.

Somewhere above her floated the idea which they could none of them grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea, an idea like a butterfly... She did her best to brush away the film and to conceive something to be worshipped... but failed, always misled by the voice of Mr. Bax saying things which misrepresented the idea, and by the patter of baaing inexpressive human voices falling round her like damp leaves. (264-265)

Once again, the words of the church service are insufficient as a form of communication, and as Rachel looks around the room, she acknowledges that there is something that is being overlooked by her fellow churchgoers. Critically, *something* does exist (it “floated... escaping out of reach”), thus there is in the church a truth, a sense of the divine word that cannot be grasped. Woolf does not entirely deny the necessity of faith or the natural presence of a vital truth, but ironizes and examines the unilateral focus on the search for religious meaning in one’s life. The attempts to reach truth through language are not enough; however, and Rachel finds herself uninspired and disgusted by the end of the service. The worshipping voices are insufficient to determine the truth of religion, as are the misrepresentations proposed by the monumental Mr. Bax. Once again, the protagonist of Woolf’s texts finds herself exhausted by language, which is presented as parallel to religious truth, unable to discern any meaning within the endless noise, the “one chanting sound which paused, and then renewed itself, a little higher or a little lower” (266).

In formal characteristics; however, the writing with which Woolf describes Rachel’s experience at the service *is* transcendental or revelatory: “rapture and self-empowering

consciousness are aspects of Woolf's primordial experience of words" (Scott 376), and this aspect of Woolf's language is apparent in her personification of language. As the biblical word of God had the power to be divine, produce divinity, and create the universe, Woolf endows her own writing with the same sense of infinite production. At once, the words and concepts that the pastor references are "damp leaves," "a butterfly," or "mountains," capable of personified action and vitality: they fall, float, renew, escape, and almost infinitely *contain*. Therefore, I would argue that it is fundamentally impossible to detach Woolf's writing in *The Voyage Out* from biblical or orthodox religious tradition – Rachel's spiritual dejection in the church of Mr. Bax does not change the essential elements of human faith; Woolf's modernist writing simply alters the mode by which it is delivered to the reader.

This process is also performed over the course of the narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway*, again at two disparate levels of the text: through the intricate, sentence level empowerment of words, ideas, and phrases, and on a larger scale of the thematic, tonal, and rhetorical references made by Woolf. A primary example is the plane that flies over the characters in various areas of London, spelling out the word "toffee." It is an entirely unexciting feat of modern advertisement, but the search for the meaning of the letters and the word itself is described in the narrative as an existentially fulfilling experience:

It was strange; it was still. Not a sound was to be heard above the traffic. Unguided it seemed; sped of its own free will. And now, curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, an O, an F. (Woolf 28)

The world seems to stop as everyone gazes upwards at the sky: Septimus, Rezia, the crowd of people at the gates of Buckingham Palace, Mrs. Dempster – even Clarissa Dalloway inside of her

home asks “What are they looking at?” (28). The performance of language is incredibly public and spiritual in a satirical sense – as much as Septimus may gain a sense of religious significance from the text (that literally appears in the heavens), the event occurs due to the complexities of human economic structure and the psychological spectacles of modern advertisement. Woolf seems to demonstrate that in a world so dominated by human interests, there will never truly exist such a thing as the divine word.

Woolf introduces to us another figure in *Mrs. Dalloway* that speaks to the Forsterian conception of the divine word of God: “the battered woman” (79) who hums or sings a mysterious, ethereal chant to the passerby of London, who has “the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth” (Woolf 79). The song of the old woman is sung “with an absence of all human meaning,” which recalls Forster’s description of the echo in the Marabar caves: “it is entirely devoid of distinction” (Forster 163), without meaning, baffling and surreal to the listener. The sound is this–

ee um fah um so

foo swee too eem oo

...

ee um fah um so

foo swee too eem oo (79)

– and it is implied that it is repeated over and over, echoing around the buildings near the Regents Park Tube station. It is critical to note, as well, that the woman singing represents a primordial symbol of antiquity, “there is a form of eternity, not static permanence, but a natural cycle of compos[t]ing here” (Scott 379). As an aspect of the natural world, the woman is earthly, vital, and infinitely symbolic. Her voice is “without direction, vigour, beginning or end,”

recalling the assertion given by God in the book of Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 22:13). If the divine presence in the Bible *is* the beginning and the end, the woman’s chant is entirely without god, without holy “direction,” absolutely apart from biblical tradition and the human significance given to organized religion. It could also be analyzed that the woman’s chant may be without god in that her song goes beyond the binary starting and ending points of the rule of the divine, signifying an earthly, human sense of eternity that transcends the simplicity of absolute divine creation.

Thus, much of Woolf’s writing regards a certain conception of language that intends to express the idea of a latent spirituality that governs most or all human interaction, particularly a sense of faith that moves between and amongst characters by way of language. The chant of the old woman moves throughout time and space, pushing past the absolute temporal domination of the Judeo-Christian god. Allen elaborates: “The expansion of the moment creates such a plenitude, holding, as it does, the past, present, and future in concentration, that the moment itself is experienced as eternity” (Allen 193). The sound, like the echo of the Marabar caves and the skywriting of the plane, is meditative, repetitive, eternal. The battered woman’s chant covets the attention of Peter Walsh and Rezia Warren Smith, tearing them away from their worries about their respective partnerships in the novel, much as the Marabar echo moves Mrs. Moore’s mind away from her letter to Stella and Ralph. In Woolf’s text, language is religion, the thing towards which her characters strive, it represents what they search for and what they are disgusted to find.

Like Forster, then, Woolf’s use of language in her short stories and novels implies an entirely modernist understanding of spirituality. I have demonstrated that this element of her writing can be observed at a specific level of figurative language (in her personification and empowerment of individual words and phrases as spiritual actants) and at a larger, thematic level,

encoded in the complex and intricate modes of signification that are woven within her texts. Emily Griesinger provides a summary of Woolf's writing as a reaction to the experiences of the first World War and subsequent suffering and death, and evaluates her texts as enchanted, dealing with human suffering and darkness in a uniquely modernist fashion:

“Woolf was keenly aware of the darkness in the human soul. If nothing else, her fiction demonstrates the effort to overcome such darkness through the beauty and wholeness of language, for example through metaphors of illumination, epiphany, and transcendence... and by drawing attention to our need for human sympathy and love” (457)

There may not exist an alpha or omega, there may not be a God as prewar culture might want there to be. But there is still faith, enchantment, spirituality, and beauty within the souls of humans and in the complexities of language. We will see in a short story by Borges that this spiritual aspect of modernist writing and language is ubiquitous across continents and cultures.

David Foster Wallace writes in a review of Edwin Williamson's biography of Jorge Luis Borges (*Borges: A Life*) that “The truth, briefly stated, is that Borges is arguably the great bridge between modernism and post-modernism in world literature.” This simple claim is compounded by the observation that Borges “is a modernist in that his fiction shows a first-rate human mind stripped of all foundations in religious or ideological certainty -- a mind turned thus wholly in on itself.” There is no iteration of my present study in which I could be led to truly or unequivocally oppose David Foster Wallace on any of his literary analyses; however, I would propose that the claim that Borges's protagonists are “stripped of all foundations in religious certainty” may benefit from a more in-depth analysis of his literature. While Borges is definitively a modernist (a modernist that indeed bridges the ideological and figurative gap between modernism and

postmodernism), I would argue that this classification is engendered by the *irrevocable* foundations of his literature in some sense of religious certainty. This element of modernist text perhaps contains a more occlusive sense of religion than most modernists would care to admit in an explication of their own fictive works. Wallace then moves to criticize Williamson's analysis of Borges's life as it may have been expressed in his fiction. He considers the relevance of biographical detail in questionably allegorical works such as Borges's stories, writing: "The stories so completely transcend their motive cause that the biographical facts become, in the deepest and most literal way, irrelevant." Despite this, I believe that Borges's stories (as much as some would like them to) do not exist outside of the world and cannot deny their authorship. While I do not believe that an analysis of Borges's personal religion or spiritual beliefs can provide an absolute or complete explanation of the content of his many stories, I will nonetheless include a brief explanation of Borges's personal religion within my study. As Foucault wrote, "It would be false to consider the function of the author as a pure and simple reconstruction after the fact of a text given as passive material, since a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author" (1403).

In an interview with Osvaldo Ferrari, Jorge Luis Borges seems to proclaim that he is a hesitant agnostic. As will be visited later on in our examination of "The Writing of the God," Borges is interested in an approximation, the striving of humanity towards divine truth.

If god means something in us that strives for good, yes. If he's thought of as an individual being, then no, I don't believe. I believe in an ethical proposition, perhaps not in the universe but in each one of us... I do think that it's safer not to call [transcendence] God. If we call it God, then we are thinking of an individual and that individual is mysteriously three, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, which to me is quite inconceivable.

While in-depth biographical information may prove important to a more general analysis of Borgesian literature, I hope to only briefly discuss this aspect of Borges's life, as a more expansive examination remains outside of the scope of the present argument. Borges seems here to describe a personal belief in panentheism (if there is any larger religious sect this panentheism may relate to, it is not detailed in the interview). As I discussed, Borgesian "religious" literature operates under this biographical aspect: there exists divinity, there is no individual known as "God," and a sense of holiness or "godliness" radiates within "each one of us."

Another (partially) biographical issue is the sense of "approximation" or "approach" that Borges hints at in the interview: "On the other hand, if we employ other words, perhaps less precise or vivid ones, then we could approach a truth, if an approach to truth is possible." The "approach" that Borges describes characterizes yet again his adherence to agnostic belief (the assumption that we do not know, and may never know, religious truth at its core) in citing a sense of longing or searching for understanding. This strange nostalgia for the divine is characteristic of the modernist period in literature, a corpus of literature that generally denies any adherence to religious belief, especially biblical tradition. This being said, Borges admits in his stories abundant references to motifs of the divine Word, as proposed by Hinduism and the apostle John.

The religious character of modernism is exemplified in "The Writing of the God." Amongst numerous religious motifs and anxiety-inducing images, we see emerging a Platonic allegory of sorts, bolstered by the all-too-familiar consciousness-based narration of so many other short stories during the mid-century period:

You have awakened not out of sleep, but into a prior dream, and that dream lies within another, and so on, to infinity, which is the number of the grains of sand. The path that

you are to take is endless, and you will die before you have truly awakened... I cannot be killed by sand that I dream— nor is there any such thing as a dream within a dream.

Before moving into a closer analysis of the Borgesian understanding of the the Word, I will point out the surrealist-religious significance of this passage: Borges employs the critical metaphor between dreams and sand, comparing the seemingly infinite nature of his dreams (framed within dreams) to the multiplicity and eternity of the sands of the earth. This metaphor is indisputably religious, recalling the language of Genesis, as God promises Abraham that he will be blessed with “descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). The motif is continued later in the case of Jacob: “I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted” (Gen. 32:12). This provides us with evidence of a biblical symbol that is used by Borges, the multiplicity of the sands. With much eloquence, Borges in this narrative employs a complete reversion to the faith of antiquity (an indigenous South American antiquity). He later speaks of “idols” and “forms,” instead of using the typical language that generally surrounds traditional religious worship before the 20th century.

The torment of the protagonist of the narrative (in the dark, cold, senseless chamber) as a result of some kind of ritualistic torture characterizes the philosopher as a Christ-like figure (“Before my eyes they toppled the idol to the god, yet the god did not abandon me, and I held my silence through their tortures. They tore my flesh, they crushed me, they mutilated me” [250]). Eventually, the philosopher finds some kind of meaning in his life through a calling that he discovers: deciphering the word of God from the spots on a jaguar (in the original Spanish text, “jaguar” and “tigre” are used interchangeably, implying a Kafkaesque questioning of the

significance of the actual species of animal). The ponderance of the imprisoned protagonist begins our analysis:

“I reflected that even in the languages of humans there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say “the jaguar” is to say all the jaguars that engendered it, the deer and the turtles it has devoured, the grass that fed the deer, the earth that was mother to the grass, the sky that gave light to the earth.”

The philosopher quickly realizes in his study that it is not possible to determine the word of God without acknowledging the infinite dialogic significations behind the utterance, that the jaguar and its spots cannot be proposed without the inherency of the beings that it has consumed, the beings that those beings have consumed, and the entire implicit food chain all the way back to the “sky that gave light to the earth” in order to initiate the process of life. We can understand these dialogic consequences as Bakhtin explicated them: “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment... cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (1012). And the philosopher's illusory utterance, the word of the divine, is very profoundly alive, pacing back and forth in the opposite side of the dark vault, eating the same meat and drinking the same water as its human counterpart. In this compounding, multiplying description of the significance of the jaguar, Borges elevates further and further this divine word that his philosopher is to find. In the search for the word of God, the dialogism inherent in the language of humanity enables ontological connection between life (zoë and bios), organic and inorganic.

We can look a few lines previous to the aforementioned quote, in which Borges directly introduces the religious motif of the Word to his narrative. His evaluation of the experience of the word is multi-faceted and intense, as the protagonist continues his role of philosopher-priest.

A god, I reflected, must speak but a single word, and in that word there must be *absolute plenitude*. No word uttered by a god could be less than the universe, or briefer than the sum of time. The ambitions and poverty of human words – *all, world, universe* – are but shadows or simulacra of that Word which is the equivalent of a language and all that can be comprehended within a language. (252)

Through his character, Borges explains that there is a profound wisdom in understanding that the language of the divine must be at once simple and multiple. He again reflects Bakhtin's thinking, stating that "the ambitions and poverty of human words," even of large words that refer to things like the whole world and the entire universe, inevitably only collapses into histories of meaning. Language created by humanity, while infinitely dialogic, can only reference itself and can never achieve the purity, or the entirety, of the divine, spoken word of a god. The phrase "*absolute plenitude*" brings to mind images of holy infinity, the ability of this "single word" to create thought, speech, and humanity, and each word that comes from the utterance of the divine must be equal to or greater than the universe. Borges's writing has a fundamental relation to the biblical story and historical conception of the *logos spermatikos*, and we must turn to Jacques Derrida in order to characterize that elusive connection.

I am interested mainly in Derrida's understanding of the concept of "supplement," as Borges seems to be operating along the same philosophical lines in this excerpt. Derrida understood language to be an approximation for the true meaning of each attempt at communication.

It is always ambiguous, or more accurately 'undecidable,' whether the supplement adds itself and "is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence," or whether "the supplement supplements... adds only to replace... represents and makes an

image... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness” (OG 144). Ultimately, Derrida suggests that the supplement is both of these things, accretion and substitution (OG 200), which means that the supplement is “not a signified more than a signifier, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech” (OG 315). It comes before all such modalities. (IEP)

Borges reflects upon this proposal in his passage, using the same diction that Derrida works with in *Of Grammatology*: “in that word there must be *absolute plenitude*” (Borges 252), concluding that the word of a god would not be the “supplemental” version of Derrida’s *supplement*, but the “additive” iteration. In this divine word, presence is absolute. The trapped philosopher’s word of god is not a word of human language, then, as this absolute presence could not allow room for the stain of human meaning, of human dialogism. This is what Borges’s philosopher intends to reference when he explains the “poverty” of human words, and it is evidentiary of the Judeo-Christian influence on Borges’s philosophy: the biblical word of god had absolute plenitude (and primacy) as well, so much plenitude that the text has since dominated humanity as we know it. At this point, it becomes necessary to return to that original text and understand Borges’s story as biblically and mythologically critical.

The word of God is fundamental to the ethos of the New Testament, and the holy gospel of John begins with the famous excerpt that gives credence to much of the historical, religious, and cultural assumptions in the rest of the text.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and
the Word was God. He was with
God in the beginning. Through

him all things were made; without
him nothing was made that has
been made. In him was life, and
that life was the light of all
mankind. The light shines in the
darkness, and the darkness has not
overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

Not only does Borges reference the divine sense of language from the biblical tradition, his philosopher is also bathed in this primordial “darkness” that is presented in opposition to God. As the ultimate religious presence of the divine word is promoted as causative of creation, it is also directly associated with light: therefore the absence of language is connected with darkness, the impenetrable darkness that is experienced by the man in the vault. It is significant, then, that the only glimpse at holiness that the philosopher can achieve is when there is some light shed upon him and the jaguar: “During the course of each blind day I was granted an instant of light, and thus was I able to fix in my mind the black shapes that mottled the yellow skin” (252). This reading grants some amount of hope to the story of Borges’s philosopher (who faces a grim ending in the story): “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This implication may be slightly extraneous, but the inherent connection between the presence of language, light, and holiness remains.

While the book of John and the entirety of the New Testament is Christian religious tradition, the mythological-religious symbolism remains similar throughout various traditions. The creation story in Genesis is based upon the *logos spermatikos*, and language is established to be the basis of light: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). To

observe that Borges is writing from not only a basis in biblical motif, but an understanding of a larger mythological context of creation, we can look at the Jewish tradition of the golem, which is a figure that is “unformed and imperfect, or a body without a soul” (Levine quoted in Fenkl 5).

The theory and method for creating a golem are found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a Jewish mystical text... also known as “The Book of Creation.” According to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, God created the cosmos by using the ten divine emanations of the Sefirot and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Levine continues, “Medieval techniques of creating a golem often revolved around a highly complex procedure which required the mystic(s) to recite... an array of Hebrew alphabet letter combinations and/or various permutations of one or more Names of God. The final key to Golem creation is an activation word, which also serves as a deactivation device. (Fenkl 5)

Naturally, Borges’s philosopher is deeply reminiscent of this ancient Jewish tradition/mythology. With this, I believe that it is logical to identify the philosopher within the story as a sort of golem himself – as he finally deciphers the writing of the God that is encrypted upon the tiger, he proclaims: “It is a formula of fourteen random (apparently random) words, and all I would have to do to become omnipotent is speak it aloud” (Borges 253). Of course, the traditional golem figure is “unformed and imperfect,” but Borges’s golem seems to have understood how to become divine himself, although he will “let the mystery writ upon the jaguars die with” him. This connection is ripe for interpretation, but unfortunately a further analysis lies outside the scope of this examination. Nonetheless, the significance of speech in divine creation can be identified as a larger spiritual tradition, rather than just a biblical convention. Shortly, I will also look at the case of Borges’s story entitled “The Circular Ruins,” hoping to examine further how this motif operates within his literature. For now, we must return to the question of Borges’s

modernism, understanding the lesser-known Latin American author as physically separate from, yet wholly connected with Woolf and Forster.

While Borges himself may have been agnostic and detached from organized religion, his work and critical reception to his writing certainly cannot separate itself from the spiritual tendencies of modernist literature. Just as Forster engaged critically with eastern spirituality and the *logos spermatikos*, and as Woolf empowered language through personification and futile attempts at communication, Borges engages with a uniquely ritualistic analysis of the way that language operates within the soul of the human. The story transcends secularism in the same way as many other texts of the modernist period: stripping organized religion bare, and using this fundamental spiritual language as a reimagined essence of the human soul.

Borges, as I have mentioned, was distantly connected to Woolf and Forster in the Bloomsbury group in London during the early twentieth century. When one types “modernist authors” into a Google search, Woolf and Forster are listed, but Borges is nowhere to be found. In almost every other website that discusses modernism and gives lists of books and authors, Woolf is one of the first names cited, with Forster appearing on many of them as well. I would account for the lack of secure modernist categorization of Forster by noting that as a close friend and mutual soul of Virginia Woolf’s (and as a part of the Bloomsbury group), his writing is inherently implicated in these articles and study aids that discuss modernism, even when his name is pushed out of the ranking by Eliot, Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, and the rest. Borges does not appear on these lists that include mainly North American and European authors, particularly novelists. I believe that considering the critical relationship of the Borgesian conceptualization of spirituality in “The Writing of the God” and its inherent connection with the same linguistic engagement of Forster and Woolf, the modernist literary canon would benefit from the inclusion

of Jorge Luis Borges. The writings of all three work fundamentally in tandem with one another, communicating across the boundaries of time and nationality. If Borges in “The Writing of the God” poses the question: “What is the mystery, the secret, the word of God?” Forster in his novel answers: “‘bo-oum,’ or ‘ou-boum.’”

The divine *logos spermatikos* is not the only remnant of traditional religious thought that we might find in modernist literature, and the searching for language and the journey towards a meaningful “word” of God is not all that Borges offers to us in terms of religious significance within his writings. We can examine another biblical motif that appears in Borgesian and later literature: oneiric creation. In Borges’s story of “Las ruinas circulares” (“The Circular Ruins”), a “grey” man meditates repeatedly for years, eventually creating a human being through his dreams and training him to leave his mind and operate in the real world. The story ends in fiery disaster, and the grey man realizes that throughout the entire narrative, he is an “illusion,” a product of someone else’s dream. The oneiric narrative is not unique to Borges during modernism, a much-noted example of surreal modernist stories is the work of Kafka, which is often reminiscent of an anxious, sweat-inducing nightmare. Due to the rise in popularity of Sigmund Freud and his theories of psychoanalysis, surreal narratives were highly popular around Borges’s time. We see that “The Circular Ruins” has the same ritual tension and searching tonality as “The Writing of the God,” all thematically reminiscent of Woolf’s sense of searching for truth through language and Forster’s simultaneous empowerment and reduction of divine language. The story is laden with religious images: the temple-area where the grey man performs

his dream-creation is a shrine to a “god” who “no longer received the homage of men,” the biblical Adam appears in the narrative as a weak and deformed figure made of dust, and the premise of the story is the creation of a “son” for the grey man, as God created Adam, or Jesus. This Judeo-Christian motif of the dream-prophecy or dream-creation appears in the Old Testament of the Bible in Abraham’s visions (dreams): “Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him” (Gen. 15:12) is written just before God speaks to him, and this is seen at many other points throughout the biblical narrative. Thus, we can observe further avenues for research into the topic of religion during modernism, other motifs that might be more exhaustively reviewed outside of the study of language and the divine word.

As we move from mid-twentieth century literary production towards the later period of magical realism (particularly in Latin America) during the 1960’s and 70’s, a similar text appears that seems to take notes from Borges’s earlier oneiric story: “La noche boca arriba” (“The Night Face Up”) by Julio Cortazar. The story begins with a man who is involved in a motorcycle accident and while in the hospital, dreams that he is alive during the time of the Aztec empire, and is fleeing warriors through a forest. As he moves in and out of sleep in the hospital during his treatment, he repeatedly dreams that he is running through the trees or narrowly escaping arrows and spears. As he is being put to death in his dream he suddenly understands that the flight through the forest *was* his real life the entire time, the vision of a motorcycle driving through Buenos Aires was the actual dream. The oneiric narrative does not contain the same spiritual (or religious) significance as “The Circular Ruins,” but the influence of Borges on the later Latin American movement of magical realism is clear. Indeed, I will reiterate that Kafka was another major source of inspiration for the magical realist movement during the later parts of the twentieth century, demonstrating the resounding and critical sway that modernist writers such

as Borges had on long-term literary production, especially that of Latin America. Thus it is critical to understand the linguistic spirituality of other writers such as Forster and Woolf during modernism as a lasting literary monument that would preside over the continual and present philosophical and political debate surrounding secularism and religion.

It becomes necessary to elaborate on another larger aspect of modernist writing, that is the empowerment of non-human actors in stories that inherently and naturally takes away agency from human interests or the human characters that appear within the texts. T. S. Eliot, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf, provides an apt example for this operation in his poem *The Waste Land*. While language is an inhuman character that operates powerfully within the story, Eliot more actively personifies time as an empowered figure. In the first section of the poem, Eliot writes Time as another character in the poetic movement: the month of April is “breeding” (1), “Winter kept us warm” (5) and “Summer surprised us” (8). In “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot recounts an encounter between a typist and her sexual partner.

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
 Out of the window perilously spread
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (222-227)
 ...
 The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
 Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired. (235-238)

The typist is mechanized in Eliot's words, drawn in and paralyzed by inhumanity. Her "drying combinations" have been spread "perilously," the contents of her wardrobe are listed insignificantly, having been "piled" unemotionally on the divan. Eliot's description of a woman's uneventful night is matter-of-fact and dry. The young man (notice that both characters are unnamed) enters the scene unremarkably, the woman becomes "bored and tired," and seems to be indifferent to the ("unreproved/undesired") advances of the young man. Later, even the passionate climax of the couple's night together is described mechanically, as Eliot emphasizes the woman's reluctance to engage with her partner, her "indifference" towards the young man's vanity, her seemingly routine acceptance of an incredibly human activity that is generally described with a romantic flair, with a sense of enchantment and transcendence. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot performs a similar operation as Forster, Woolf, and Borges. Returning to "Kew Gardens" for a moment, we can recall how Woolf empowered words while removing agency from the characters that spoke them. Similarly, Eliot denies the anthropocentric, removing agency and voice from the human actors in his literature. Considering the juxtaposition of this scene with the previous animation of a passionate, active time, we see how modernism does not only give spiritual power and significance to language, but other equally meditative philosophical concepts: Eliot shows us that time is one example.

It is also worth reiterating the archetypal or mythological significance of the word of god, or of language as a formation of religious worship. While the appropriation or incorporation of this motif is widespread throughout modernist literature, its use is by no means limited to this period of time in which language is so often analyzed. The biblical sense of *logos spermatikos*, creation by language, and the sacred word are known from the bible and primarily from Genesis

and the gospel of John, but the idea of breath and language as life-giving originates in Hinduism (to review, see the section about this in the introduction). Andrew Lazo writes that “spurred not only by an essential rejection of the Judeo-Christian creation story and sparked by Darwin, Modernist thought and the nascent science of anthropology develops a fascination with primitive cultures and their stories, namely, myths” (13). While I would argue that modernism’s relationship with the “Judeo-Christian creation story” is more of an examination than a “rejection” as Lazo writes, there is an irony in the revolutionary modernist period’s obsession with the ancient and primitive. Virginia Woolf herself was closely involved with primitivism, as a friend of Roger Fry’s during his post-impressionist exhibit in 1910 (Seshagiri 64). As a glance back to their past, modernist authors analyzed language with an understanding and reverence for its ancient significance, both cultural and religious. Creation myths from various religious traditions are founded in the same understanding of language as creation:

On the cutting edge of literary theory, one prominent idea is that everything is merely text; in the Judeo-Christian story of cosmogenesis, in the beginning was the Word; in Hinduism and Buddhism, creation began with the primal syllable; in astrophysics, one of the major Nobel Prize-winning discoveries of the past century was the three-degree background radiation in the universe, what we now know is the “echo of the Big Bang, the sound that started it all. Perhaps that loud explosion was a word, after all. (Fenkl 9)

So we see that Forster, Woolf, and Borges write from an infinitely long tradition, borrowing motif from civilizations and cultures that existed hundreds of years ago – I do not believe that this aspect of the study reduces the significance of the presence of linguistic appreciation in modernist literature, but gives more power to these authors. The observation is corroborated by Bell: “Many of these writers shared... a very relevant interest in myth, and not just at the level of

thematic content but as a structuring principle and a mode of response to the world” (100). Modernist authors wrote during a period that would pride itself on maintaining a separation from the previous moments of antiquity (and I do not mean to say that our three subjects of study do not perform this operation), but much of modernist literature demonstrates an appreciation and rebirth of antiquity, as a response to the form and technological reality that was steadily moving away from the interests of the past.

Therefore, I will once again reiterate a point that has been made by various scholars and critics of modernist literature. To argue for modernism as an entirely secular or completely religious period has no essential basis in fact or evidence: as I discussed in the introduction, Craig Bradshaw Woelfel examines the binary of belief surrounding modernism, condemning the “either/or” logic that tends to dominate discussion surrounding a particular literary period. Each modernist author had a relative position to Christianity, that notorious delineator of social organization: Forster condemned Judeo-Christian doctrine but found peace in the eastern religions, Woolf grew up surrounded by atheists, but felt that there might be enchantment within the walls of the church, and Borges called himself agnostic and practiced a literary agnosticism, searching through the spots on a jaguar for the word of God. Modernism is not by any means religious, but is by all definitions spiritual, and the common association between the words should be carefully traversed in our characterization of the period to the uninitiated layperson. In an attempt to summarize the implications of this study, I would thus advocate for a partial redefinition of the modernist literary period (which has so famously evaded binary classification). Modernist literature (and its characters, motifs, and components) almost always falls in the blurry space between the relatively strict binaries of previous literary production: modernists do not care to commit themselves to good or evil, black or white, male or female,

religion or secularism. One thing that connects the vast framework of authors in modernism is their pursuit for, and examination of, language. There is untapped spirituality to be found in that word, infinite textual creation available for use in the breath that comes from our mouths and the voices in novels. As Michael Bell writes: “One definition of modernity might be the awareness that the world... is a human creation. Human beings do not create world out of nothing... but world as the meaningful order they inhabit is a human creation – most notably by virtue of language” (102). There is a place for religion and spirituality in modernism after all: when the authors of antiquity searched for the meaning of life in their texts, they found God; when modernist authors conducted the same search, they found language.

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