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Seeing/Scene-ing Imagination in Virginia Woolf's "Nurse Lugton's Curtain"❖

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Sir Thomas Browne's ruminations on the dialectics between life and death, wakefulness and sleep in his books might have influenced Virginia Woolf when she wrote the "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." This short story might not be as playful and hedonistic as it seems. On closer scrutiny, it oscillates between life and death, wakefulness and sleep, and reminds us how rare it is when imagination, incarnated as animals in the story, is present, since most of the time humans are either blind to it or have killed it already. Lugton might be blind to her imagination, but Woolf's writing skill, free indirect discourse and her capacity for scene-making, render her imagination vivid by concealing any human-centered perspectives in the text and by presenting scenes in which the reader can perceive the route that the animals take, which is also the trail that the imagination treads. Without any quotation marks to solidify the speaking subject, the reader can immerse themselves into the consciousness of the text (hence free), but the scenes are still made present through a textual perspective that Woolf embeds in the story (hence indirect). Her engagement with different writing techniques unremittingly reminds us how elusive and slippery imagination is, and artists' works, e.g., "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" and Nurse Lugton's curtain, are (futile) human endeavors to capture it.

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KEYWORDS: Virginia Woolf, Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, *Urn-Burial*, death, life, “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain,” imagination

維吉妮亞．吳爾芙〈保母路可頓的窗簾〉中的看見／遇見想像力

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摘　要

本文認為，布朗爵士在他的《醫生的信仰》(*Religio Medici*)與《甕葬》(*Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial*)中，對生與死、清醒與睡眠之間的辯證思考可能影響了吳爾芙撰寫〈保母路可頓的窗簾〉("Nurse Lugton's Curtain")。這個短篇故事並不如表面上讀起來的童趣和歡愉。若我們仔細觀察，可以發現這個故事擺盪在生與死、清醒與睡眠之間，並提醒我們，在故事中化身為動物的想像力是多麼地罕見，因為大多數的時候，人類要麼對它視而不見，要麼——如同保母路可頓一般——早就已經殺死了它。路可頓可能對她的想像力視而不見，但吳爾芙的寫作技巧——自由間接話語和她的場景製作能力，卻透過在故事中安排一個不以任何人為中心的視角，以及讀者可以感知動物移動路線的場景，將想像力呈現於讀者眼前。沒有任何引號鞏固說話的主體，讀者可以沉浸在文本的意識中(因此是自由的)，但場景仍然透過吳爾芙嵌入故事中的文本視角呈現(因此是間接的)。她對不同寫作技巧的運用不斷提醒我們想像力是多麼難以捕捉，而藝術家的作品，例如〈保母路可頓的窗簾〉和保母路可頓的窗簾，都是人類試圖捕捉它、卻可能徒勞無功的努力。

關鍵詞：維吉妮亞．吳爾芙、布朗爵士、《醫生的信仰》、《甕葬》、死亡、生命、〈保母路可頓的窗簾〉、想像力

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I. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" is usually read as one of the two children's stories that she wrote.[1] According to Susan Dick, the story was discovered by Michael Halls among the Charleston Papers kept in King's College Library, Cambridge, in the 1980s ("Notes" 296). Later, it was collected in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, edited by Dick and published by Vintage in 1985. Harcourt singled out this story and published it with colorful illustrations by Julie Vivas, a prominent Australian illustrator in 1991. The Vivas-illustrated *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* soon became the most common version circulating on the book market. What is less well known is that there was an earlier version of the Lugton story that Woolf wrote in 1924. According to Kristin Czarnecki, the tale was unknown for many years until it was discovered in 1963 by Wallace Hildick in the manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway* housed in the British Museum (222). It was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 17 June 1965 (as "The . . ."). The text was later titled *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* by Leonard Woolf and published by the Hogarth Press in 1966, accompanied by six black-and-white ink sketches by Duncan Grant. Woolf revised this story several times and renamed it "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" (Czarnecki 222; Dick, "Notes" 296), which has subsequently become the most-read version of the Lugton story.[2] These two versions may share the same story structure; however, their sentence sequence and word choice are completely different. I discuss only "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," the more widely circulated version, throughout this paper due to its more complete rendition of Sir Thomas Browne's influence on Woolf.

Recent critical analyses have not led to adequate understandings of this story's importance, perhaps due to the influence of Leonard's counterintuitive comment on his wife's posthumously discovered text, i.e., the *Thimble* version of the Lugton story. According to Leonard, it "appears suddenly in the middle

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[1] As a regular contributor to the Bell family newsletter, *The Charleston Bulletin*, Woolf coauthored a short story, "The Widow and the Parrot," with her nephews in 1923. Maria Popova thinks that this was the first children's story that Virginia wrote, and the Lugton story was the second one.

[2] In the foreword to *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble*, Leonard Woolf confirms that this story was specifically written for Virginia's six-year-old niece, Ann Stephen, when the girl visited the Woolfs with her mother, Karin Costelloe Stephen, in 1924 (4). It was undated when the typescript draft of "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" was discovered in the 1980s. Dick believes that the *Curtain* version was revised from the *Thimble* version. In *A Haunted House*, she places "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" among other short stories written between 1922 and 1925.

of the text of the novel [*Mrs. Dalloway*], but has nothing to do with it" (L. Woolf 4). Literary critics have interpreted the Lugton story primarily by focusing on Woolf's perennial concern about women and their creativity. Czarnecki, for instance, argues that Woolf's act of renaming and revising the Lugton story several times reveals her deep anxiety as a female author—a view broadly shared by Sayaka Okumura, who picks up the entangled thread between women, knitting/sewing and writing. Okumura argues that Nurse Lugton in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" is "another self-portrait of Woolf" as a no-nonsense artist (175). For Sebastian Williams, alongside another children's story by Woolf, "The Widow and the Parrot," "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" expresses her bioethical concerns about nonhuman animals (106). Other recent scholars have examined the fruitful dialogues between Woolf's words and the illustrations of multiple artists. Carrie Rohman, for instance, compares Grant's sketches with Vivas's watercolor illustrations and sees the curtain illustrated by Vivas as an extension of Woolf's creativity and as the materialization of the potential of nonhuman life. Caroline Marie adopts a similar analytic framework in order to compare the illustrations by Grant, Napo and Vivas, and she depicts the quintessential nuances of these painters' aesthetic renderings in great detail.

My point in this paper is to broaden the readings of "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" since it has remained on the periphery of Woolf's works and Woolfian studies. The paper will be divided into two parts. I will first have recourse to Sir Thomas Browne, a seventeenth century physician, essayist, wordsmith and author that Woolf often read, to argue that Woolf's repeated deliberation on Browne's idiosyncratic description of death in numerous essays, e.g., "Reading" (1919), "Sir Thomas Browne" (1923) and "The Elizabethan Lumber Room" (1925), might have influenced her writing of "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," which she wrote around roughly the same time. I want to argue that Browne's influence on Woolf does not appear as late as its manifestation in *Orlando* (1928), as critics have argued (Caughie; Ryan), but already appeared implicitly as early as in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" (1924). Browne was obsessed with the entangled dialogue/dialectics between life and death, wakefulness and sleep. Although Woolf's preoccupation with life and death permeates her works from the beginning of her career, she never explores elsewhere the dialogue/dialectics between wakefulness and sleep as subtly as in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain."

In the story, animals are in a state of "lifelessness" (Levy 148) as they are enchanted and frozen in place on Lugton's curtain. Most of the time, they are in a state akin to death since there is no way for them to escape the clutches of Nurse Lugton while she is awake. Only when she is fast asleep, or in a temporary death, can these animals return to life. But once Lugton wakes up, they have to return to their original lifeless state. The loop does not reach its end when the story ends. I will argue that the coming and going of animals indicate that imagination is the thing to which Lugton is blind (since she never lays her eyes on the animals when they wander around and never notices the life force they embody), and that her textile production conveys not a burgeoning creativity but a lifeless ambiance. On further thought, if the relation between the animals and Lugton indicates that the dual dialectics of life and death, wakefulness and sleep are both prevented from appearing simultaneously, the presence of these Brownian paradoxes that Woolf embeds in this story relentlessly refers to the futile endeavor of every artist who tries to render their imagination on paper. However, I will argue that the unfinished curtain indicates some unknown opportunities inherent in every artistic creation before it emerges from the artist.

In the second part of this paper, I will argue that in the face of the fleeting nature of imagination, which only becomes vivid when the Brownian oscillations between life and death, wakefulness and sleep take place in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," the best way to render it might be to let the text tell its own tale. This is achieved through the writing technique that Woolf uses in this short story—free indirect discourse. By weaving itself into the text that it is recounting, a narrating-narrated voice creates scenes for the reader. In tandem with the animals that Lugton tries but fails to capture, Woolf's language renders these animals' absence as a presence through the third-person past tense of free indirect representation. This short story avoids the readers' conceptual engagement with the fictional world, and by doing so, allows imagination to escape the constraint of rules and conventions and to be rendered vividly when we follow the aesthetic flow it creates.

II. The Brownian Death and the Woolfian Life

As a physician for whom the loss of life was part of the quotidian experience, Browne was obsessed with death but also dreaded it. His

ambivalent attitude toward death is clearly conveyed in *Religio Medici* (1643), a book that discusses his vacillating position as a Christian, which was incongruent with his profession as a physician. Later on, he returned to this theme in *Urn-Burial* (1658), a book that he wrote when several ancient urns full of human remains, including ashes and bone fragments, and other objects were excavated in 1655, in a place not far from where he lived in Norfolk. These urns and the remains in them kindled Browne's lifelong interest in the history behind the artifacts. In *Urn-Burial*, Browne compares how different cultures dealt with the dead and further contemplates the afterlife that awaits every human being. In his analysis, the dead were disposed of through cremation in Greek and Roman antiquity, while according to the Christian faith, the dead required inhumation. Their mutual desire to lead a comfortable afterlife explains why both pagans and Christians preserved the habit of burying or burning with the deceased the precious objects that they treasured or wanted to use in the posthumous world.

In Browne's thinking, death awaits us ahead and haunts our life pervasively. As he says, "If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death, our life is a sad composition; We live with death, and die not in a moment" (132).[3] Browne is deeply frustrated in the face of ineluctable death: the lifespan before its arrival is simply what human beings have to put up with, and treasuring earthly objects and building monuments turn out to be in vain. On the one hand, these ancient urns and pagan relics simply demonstrate the futility of bringing these objects to the afterlife. Once they are burnt, there is nothing left but ashes and remains. On the other hand, Christians should dispense with their earthly memory as well. When the end of days arrives and the subsequent resurrection takes place, it is futile to preserve earthbound memories and emotions in any form of memorial.

Furthermore, sleep, as the twin brother of death in Greek antiquity, is no longer a promise of sweet dreams but a frightening act that Browne dare not go through without God's benevolent guidance. In different sections of *Religio Medici*, he dwells on the entangled relation between sleep and death and

[3] All the quotes by Browne that are cited in this paper come from *Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall*, a collection edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff. This collection contains the two famous and popular books by Browne. Except for the spelling of the book title *Urn-Burial*, which has been adjusted to modern conventions as it is a keyword, other punctuations, wordings and spellings that Browne used are kept in their original fashion.

illustrates how intimidating this lived experience is to him. For example, he defines the contiguity between sleep and death:

> It is that death by which we may be literally said to die daily, a death which *Adam* died before his mortality; a death whereby we live a middle and moderating point between life and death; in fine, so like death, I dare not trust it without my prayers, and an halfe adiew unto the world, and take my farewell in a Colloquy with God. (84)

Browne piles details upon details to elaborate on how sleep reminds him only of its twin brother, death, as an ineluctable future yet to come. He makes similar points in *Urn-Burial*. As he says, "Since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying *memento's*, and time that grows old it self, bids us hope no long duration: Diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation" (135-36). For Browne, sleep is another personification of death that visits him every day, and it brings to him not the hope of diuturnity or longevity but a *memento mori*, a reminder of human destiny/destination. Beneath his anthropological and rational tone, we cannot help but notice his disappointment at human impotence to defeat death.

However, Browne does not want to entirely submit to human impotence and oblivion in the face of death. In the concluding paragraph of *Urn-Burial*, he declares his desire to be remembered:

> To subsist in lasting Monuments, to live in their productions, to exist in their names, and prædicament of *Chymera's*, was large satisfaction unto old expectations, and made one part of their *Elyziums*. But all this is nothing in the Metaphysicks of true belief. To live indeed is to be again our selves, which being not only an hope but an evidence in noble beleevers, 'Tis all one to lye in St *Innocents* Church-yard, as in the Sands of *Ægypt*: Ready to be any thing, in the extasie [ecstasy] of being ever, and as content with six foot as the Moles of *Adrianus*. (139)

The "Brownian paradox"—the juxtaposing of two opposite things or thoughts without producing confounding results—is put to practice here (Greenblatt and Targoff xxxv). On the one hand, Browne declares "a denial of 'the art of

perpetuation'" (qtd. in Clarke 3) and holds the human endeavor to be remembered up to ridicule. On the other hand, his literature, or more precisely, the text we are reading, conveys and fulfills his desire to be remembered. Greenblatt and Targoff make a similar point and say, "He [Browne] is calling attention to the folly of man's dreams of creating a grand, enduring posthumous memory . . . at the same time that the peculiarity and beauty and power of his own language makes a serious bid for him to be one of those remembered" (xxxv-xxxvi). If Browne believes that "death must be the *Lucina* of life" (135), meaning "the birth or deliverance" of life (Caughie 4), what he has in mind might not simply be the eternal salvation and the resurrection that the savior will bring to him but the "ecstasy of being ever" and being remembered by posterity through his literature. Otherwise, he would not insist on publishing the authorized edition of *Religio Medici* for fear that the pirated edition might cause some unexpected controversies among his contemporaries and posterity.

Furthermore, in spite of his frequent encounters with death, or perhaps right because of them, Woolf particularly praises Browne's effort to foreground the importance of imagination, when his writing and thinking constantly oscillate between life and death, wakefulness and sleep. As the fruit borne out of the Brownian paradox, imagination provokes his curiosity to explore the minute things in the world. Therefore, if Browne "has wished for death," "has doubted all things," "is in the dark to all the world," and "has longed for death," "the imagination [of Browne] which has gone such strange journeys among the dead is still exalted when it swings its lantern over the obscurities of the soul" (V. Woolf, "Elizabethan Lumber Room" 46; "Sir Thomas Browne" 371). For Woolf, Browne's bizarre character, which mixes together his nihilistic tendency to obsess over death and his exalted imagination and burgeoning curiosity, inspires the reader to continually adore him. As she says,

> In short, as we say when we cannot help laughing at the oddities of people we admire most, he was a character, and the first to make us feel that the most sublime speculations of the human imagination are issued from a particular man, whom we can love. (V. Woolf, "Elizabethan Lumber Room" 47)

Browne's writing certainly fulfills his wish to be remembered as a writer of "being-ever."

As it is, very few Woolfian critics have explored the Brownian traces in Woolf's work. Pamela Caughie and Derek Ryan analyze Browne's influence in Woolf's *Orlando,* while Emily James argues that Woolf's forays into coining new words were inspired by Browne, who was also a well-known wordsmith. As argued earlier, Browne's influence on Woolf does not appear only as late as *Orlando*. In the section below, I will discuss how Woolf has transformed the Brownian paradox into "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." This paradox reminds the reader not to neglect the presence of death lurking beneath the jubilant and convivial narration, and it further points out how rare the moment is when imagination flickers between life and death, wakefulness and sleep.

III. A Lethal Reading of "Nurse Lugton's Curtain"

As many critics have argued, the curtain on which Lugton is busy is her textile production, a material on which she executes her creativity. However, on closer inspection, Lugton is a life giver and taker at the same time. Not only is her creation based on the lifelessness of the animals depicted, but her existence *per se* has intimidated them and the residents of Millamarchmantopolis. From a perspective that is other than human, Lugton is a tenacious, hostile monster waiting to capture any animal that strays into her territories. Lugton is illustrated as follows: "every animal which strayed into her territories she froze alive, so that all day they stood stock still on her knee, but when she fell asleep, then they were released, and down they came in the evening to Millamarchmantopolis to drink" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 155). Lugton's existence intimidates the residents of Millamarchmantopolis, as she is depicted as a large and unfriendly monster to them: "She had a face like the side of a mountain with great precipices and avalanches, and chasms for her eyes and hair and nose and teeth" (155). The terms that describe the rough and rigid surface of her skin like a landscape insinuate Lugton's cruel and harsh character.

The story's sheer Brownian paradox appears in the two depictions of sleep—Lugton's slumber and the animals' collective state of lifelessness, which appear in turns—that Woolf arranges to enhance Lugton's dual identity. When Lugton is awake and busy sewing, animals are put to sleep or die on her curtain in a state of lifelessness. Only when Lugton falls asleep, a numb state akin to that of death, can animals and town residents come back to life. And yet once

Lugton wakes up, "[t]he animals flashed back in a second. The air became blue stuff. And the curtain lay quite still on her knee. Nurse Lugton took up her needle, and went on sewing Mrs. Gingham's drawing-room curtain" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 155). In other words, Lugton's creation is based on sewing animals in place on her curtain, on depriving them of their movements, and on putting them into a temporary state of death. The Brownian oscillations between life and death, wakefulness and sleep have not reached an end when the story does. The animals are half-alive and half-dead, in that their state is entirely determined by whether Lugton is awake or asleep. Hope Howell Hodgkins also notices Lugton's double identity, and she wonders, "Does the nurse's domestic activity mask a wild vitality, or does this artist freeze and deaden what she captures?" (361).

In this reading, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" is not entirely children-oriented because it reminds us that life does not entirely bring forth hope and new birth since death is always lurking around in the shadows. And yet neither do we have to feel defeated when our life is haunted by death, since as Browne has told us: death gives birth to life. The seemingly short-circuited loops between life and death, wakefulness and sleep, humans and nonhumans, i.e., the Brownian paradox, "the oxymoronic yoking together of spirit and matter, sublimity and corruption, life and death" (Greenblatt and Targoff xxxvi), structure "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." We can read it as the first and foremost homage that Woolf pays to her literary predecessor, Browne. As argued earlier, Browne might have inspired Woolf to write this short story, and here are a few reasons why. As he says,

> we are somewhat more than our selves in our sleepes, and the slumber of the body seemes to bee but the waking of the soule. It is the ligation of sense, but the liberty of reason, and our waking conceptions doe not match the fancies of our sleepes. (83)

In Browne's thinking, the soul or fancies will wake up in our sleep since it is also the moment when we discard our sense, reason and conception. The Brownian paradox is put to practice here: on the one hand, sleep does not bring forth tranquility and peace; for Browne, as another kind of *after*life, sleep always reminds him of the death that he dreads. In contrast, Browne also tells us that we do not have to feel frightened or frustrated, since death also partakes

in the Lucina of life; i.e., in our sleep, the soul, fancies, dreams or, particularly, imagination as another kind of after*life* will be awake.

In Virginia Woolf's "Sir Thomas Browne," she makes similar points: "He [Browne] is in the dark to all the world; he has longed for death; there is a hell within him; who knows whether we may not be asleep in this world, and the conceits of life be but dreams?" (371). In this passage about Browne, Woolf first contrasts death and life and then employs a conceit—a popular rhetorical device in the seventeenth century—to pay another homage to Browne. Conceits operate much like the Brownian paradox, where poets juxtapose seemingly unrelated elements for intellectual enjoyment. For instance, John Donne likens a couple's sexual union to a flea bite in "The Flea" (1633). Similarly, Woolf likens life to dreams in "Sir Thomas Browne," highlighting their shared uncertain and intangible nature. Upon closer examination, Woolf pays a third tribute to Browne by incorporating another conceit in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." This time, she uses the animals to stand in for the imagination, and this conceit also ruthlessly reflects how much Woolf dreads unseeing, or losing, her imagination, a point that I will explore later.

Here is another famous quote by Browne that is resonant with death as a pervasive theme in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" and that strongly supports my argument that we read the animals as the incarnation of imagination. As Browne says, "We tearme [term] sleepe a death, and yet it is waking that kils us, and destroyes those spirits which are the house of life" (84). This sentence expresses Browne's anxiety about death and sleep, but we cannot help but notice that it has become a very grotesque footnote to "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." If we refer the "we" in this famous quote to the town residents in the story, it is no wonder that under the constant threat posed by Lugton, the town residents would angrily claim that it is Lugton's waking that kills them and destroys those animals. After all, when Lugton is around or when she is "towering over them," they dare not "mov[e] over the bridge" nor "wav[e] theirs hands out of the windows" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 154, 155). The "house of life" in ancient Egyptian culture, an area of study with which Browne was obsessed, is a term aligned with knowledge and production. It was marked both in written hieroglyphs and in architecture that this is a place of kingship, knowledge and production. In this light, we can consider "spirits," "the house of life," and imagination, broadly construed, as an important aspect of Browne's notion of creation above and compare them to the animals in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain."

They are emblematic of the imagination, life force, and creativity inherent to every kind of production. As the Brownian paradox clearly demonstrates to us, they appear only when the oscillations between life and death, wakefulness and sleep take place, but sadly, as Browne has said, the animals and the imagination that they incarnate are and will be destroyed by Lugton's act of waking up (again).

In other words, if Lugton's act of waking up symbolizes that she has retrieved the dominant position, the lethal subtext inherent in her awakening is that she does not just put animals to sleep or death, she also puts her imagination to sleep or death. If animals always escape when Lugton is asleep but spend most of the time lifeless and frozen on her curtain, it simply means she does not capture their essence and fails to truly bring her imagination to life. This failure might be because the neat and precise sewing methods and conventions that Lugton has to follow and put into her needlework create conditions in which sewing may not be a perfect way to capture and render her imagination. Despite the fact that she seems to capture them on her curtain, they escape when she is asleep. Most of the time, only the vibe of lifelessness remains, while at some other time, emptiness and absence remain.

On further thought, it is safe to say that all the keywords in the aforementioned Browne quotes, be it "the spirits" or "house of life" which are killed by the act of awakening, or the "waking of the soul" and "fancies of our sleep" which take place in the act of sleeping, unanimously refer to what Browne and Woolf highly acclaim and what they are highly acclaimed for: imagination. Therefore, unlike other critics, e.g., Michelle Levy and Liliane Louvel, who read "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" as a dream, I want to argue that everything does not happen in Lugton's dream but must be in her living reality for two reasons. First, as Sigmund Freud tells us, we cannot have the same dream twice. Although two dreams might share the same structure or sound similar to each other, there is always some difference between them (however negligible). But from the familiarity of the animals and town residents with Lugton's habits, the whole thing must take place in reality, and it must have been repeated several times. Otherwise, the animals would not feel relieved to leave the curtain upon knowing that "One, two, three, four, five—ah, the old woman was at last asleep" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 154), and the town residents would not know who Lugton is and what she has been doing to these animals. Hence, "[n]obody harmed the lovely beasts; many pitied them;

for it was well known that even the smallest monkey was enchanted . . . . They [town residents] could see her, from their windows, towering over them" (155).

The second reason is that if arts always mirror the ways that artists view themselves and the cruel fact that there always exists a question as to whether they have a vision or not, then the point of reading "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" will no longer be to verify whether Lugton dreams or not but to explore how much the text has mirrored Woolf's own repressed emotions. Therefore, instead of reading Lugton as another self-portrait of Woolf as a no-nonsense artist (Okumura 175), Lugton in my analysis is the embodiment of what Woolf dreads the most: an artist who is blind to her imagination. Through the three tributes she pays to Browne in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," Woolf embeds her anxiety that she will be unable to bring her imagination to life, or even worse, that she will become—or already is—blind to it. Browne discusses his genuine anxiety about life and death, wakefulness and sleep, and Woolf builds "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" on Browne's speculations to talk about the conditions under which artists play out their imaginations. Imagination is the key issue that connects Woolf and Browne, and "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" is Woolf's confession, mirroring her anxiety that she is blind to her own imagination.

Furthermore, if these animals are the incarnation of the imagination or life force that Lugton tries to capture but fails, but which, according to Woolf and Browne, might be made known to us either when we are asleep or when we lay down our conceptual guard, the animals certainly remind us of Mrs. Brown, the life force that the Edwardian writers fail to capture or describe. As Virginia Woolf famously claims in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1984),

> Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. (205)

These Edwardian artists, Lugton included, rely too much on the conventions and rules in their fields but neglect the fact that what they should do is not follow conventions but observe life, even to the point of discarding

conventions. According to Woolf, “they [Edwardian writers] have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (205). Just like Lugton, these Edwardian writers do not create life but death. For Woolf, these writers should delve into the psychologies of their characters. In a similar vein, with all the sewing rules and methods, Lugton might be too busy or too familiar with those sewing conventions to see what she should see. In other words, these Edwardian artists are blind. On the one hand, although Mr. Bennett observes everything in the carriage, “[w]ith all his powers of observation, which are marvelous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner” (205). On the other hand, either Lugton cannot see (because she is asleep), or she sees nothing (animals are lifeless on her curtain when she awakes and can see again).

In this way of thinking, Woolf embeds another twist in the Brownian paradox to enhance to what extent Lugton might have missed the chance to see what she is supposed to see; to use John Russon’s words, Lugton is blind to her imagination and blind to her own blindness. At the beginning of the story, Lugton pushed her glasses up to her forehead, dropped her head, and started dozing off. These gestures—putting aside her glasses, dropping her head and closing her eyes—indicate that she has forsaken the ocular-centric perspective. When she wakes up, the first gesture she makes is not to put her glasses back on but to continue her sewing (V. Woolf, “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain” 154, 155). Her omitted gestures, putting her glasses back and looking upward, leave only the action of bending her head to continue her sewing, which contains extremely important meanings. In terms of the literary conceit, she is venturing forth into blindness (because she forgets to put on her glasses), but as an experienced needleworker, Lugton just relies on her embodied knowledge, especially that of her hands, to continue her work. On the one hand, Lugton does not see, or she needs not see, both of which explain Lugton’s dual blindness. On the other hand, although Lugton gives up her ocular-centric perspective, her craft, i.e., the embroidered curtain, still comes from a Lugtonian perspective. Sadly, if animals are the incarnation of her imagination, they always escape Lugton, and their elusive nature signifies that the mischievous force of creative imagination always slips away from her or any human-centered perspective. No matter how

much manual knowledge and sewing experience Lugton has in textile production, she always fails to bring about her vision/imagination.

Woolf embeds a large contrast between the extent to which the incarnation of Lugton's imagination is spectacular and the cruel fact that she is blind to it. After Lugton is asleep, animals gather around by the lake. According to the text, "Really, it was a beautiful sight—and to think of all this lying across old Nurse Lugton's knees while she slept, sitting on her Windsor chair in the lamplight—to think of her apron covered with roses and grass, and with all these wild beasts trampling on it . . ." (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 154-55). In contrast to the static and constative lexicon that Woolf uses to describe the lifeless stillness of the animals when they are sewn on Lugton's curtain, e.g., the animals "did not move" and "stood stock still," when the blue air which sent the breeze to wave the trees and the animals "became blue stuff" again as "the curtain lay quite still on her knee" (154, 155), Woolf's performative language vividly renders Lugton's vigorous and robust imagination. Right at the moment when "[t]he animals *now* began to *move*," Lugton's imagination has turned into a series of moving pictures (emphasis added; 154). However, the cruel fact is that "Nurse Lugton slept; Nurse Lugton saw nothing at all" (155). Woolf seems to suggest that not possessing any capacity to bring one's imagination to life is even worse than not possessing imagination at all. Being blind to their own creative imagination and, moreover, blind to that blindness is a horrible nightmare that every artist dreads the most.

And yet, as an artwork, Nurse Lugton's curtain still signifies a slight possibility of replacing separation, loss and incapacity with art, a goal for which artists have never stopped endeavoring. The meaning of Lugton's initial gesture, in which she "stuck her needle in" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 155) the blue curtain after she wakes up is similar to that of the initial condition that Butades, the first draughtswoman at the origin of drawing, was in when she outlines the silhouette of her lover on the eve of their separation. Both of them are blind: Butades is blind to her lover (because she turns her back on him to draw his shadow on the wall) and soon to be more permanently blind (because her lover will leave her soon), and Lugton is similarly blind to her imagination. Therefore, both artists have to rely on their hands: Butades uses a stylus to draw her lover's vague shadow on the wall, and Lugton relies on her manual knowledge of sewing without putting her spectacles back on. According to Jacques Derrida, Butades' unitary trait of blindness points to the fact that the

desired or loved object will be forever lost. As he says, "From the outset, perception belongs to recollection. Butades writes, and thus already loves in nostalgia. Detached from the present of perception, fallen from the thing itself . . . a shadow is a simultaneous memory, and Butades' stick is a staff of the blind" (Derrida 51).

In other words, these gestures, Butades' stick-drawing on the wall and Lugton's needle-sewing onto the curtain, stem from their blindness and signify the unbearable separation from the object whom they love or pursue. We can interpret the present part of their half-finished works, the draw*n* and the sew*ed*, as their works of mourning, bearing witness to the unbearable loss of their beloved objects. Thomas Gould further elaborates on Derrida's concept and says, "If drawing proceeds as an anticipation of loss, its immediate replacement by writing takes place, in part, as an instant petrification of that anticipation into nostalgia (again, the commemoration of the mark)" (164). On the other hand, although their desired objects are concealed from their sight, the missing part of their half-finished works, the draw*ing* and the sew*ing*, still solicits them, the future artists, and us the reader, to move toward the unknown prospect that art always promises us. We do not have to worry that the potentiality of the life force or imagination will be exhausted in their works, since Butades is in the middle of her drawing and Lugton is still working on her embroidery. Just as Butades' lover may come back to her one day, the possibility for Lugton to realize her imagination is also inherent in the missing part of her embroidered curtain.

If the Brownian paradox frames "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" and underscores the elusive nature of imagination, the next question we must consider is how Woolf portrays imagination in this story, especially after her harsh critique of Lugton's attempt to do the same. We all know that Woolf sometimes lamented that she failed to execute her imagined vision. However, I want to argue that if imagination can never be restrained by any form or anchored by human-centered perspectives, through her writing skill, free indirect discourse and her scene-making capacity, Woolf creates scenes in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" to which humans are blind but in which imagination will not be kept in place by any manmade rules.

IV. Seeing/Sceneing Imagination

It is well known that Woolf likes to create scenes in which the consciousness of her characters can be directly perceived by the reader. However, in some rare and extreme cases, e.g., "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" and "Time Passes" of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), scenes are created in which any human-centered perspective is withdrawn into language, as if the text were revealing its consciousness to us through the scenes built up by Woolf's performative language. In regard to her capacity for scene-making, the most famous of all the scenes that Woolf creates is when she tries to retrieve her childhood memory at Talland House in St. Ives. As Woolf says,

> St Ives gave us [the Stephens] all the same that "pure delight" which is before my eyes at this very moment. The lemon-colored leaves on the elm tree; the apples in the orchard; the murmur and rustle of the leaves makes me pause here, and think how many other than human forces are always at work on us. While I write this the light glows; an apple becomes a vivid green; I respond all through me; but how? Then a little owl [chatters]* under my window. Again, I respond. Figuratively I could snapshot what I mean by some image; I am a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays; and so on. ("Sketch" 133, sic)

Woolf stammers and doubts her ability to make present the pure delight that St. Ives once gave to her about four decades ago. All she can do in her memoir is to render a scene where she is vulnerable to nonhuman forces. This scene is saturated with various colors, sounds, and sensations but no logical thinking (yet).

In this quotation, the first-person pronoun ("I") stammers, and her perspective becomes unreliable. That explains why in extreme texts, such as the aforementioned ones that are not narrated from any particular human-centered perspective but composed through scene after scene, there is always a narrative voice that not only narrates the story but also narrates itself *into* the story. This narrating-narrated voice plays a dual role: as an onlooker to describe scenes for the reader and as an insider who is involved in the scene that it narrates. This is

one of the textual effects that free indirect discourse contributes. On the one hand, the reader is easily immersed in the stream of the text's consciousness, since there are usually no quotation marks to specify the subject of enunciation (hence free). And yet, the textual perspective of this narrating-narrated voice reminds us, from time to time, that we are reading this story from its perspective to indirectly access the fictional world (hence indirect).

Imagination in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" is too mischievous and playful to capture, since it only appears when the Brownian oscillations between life and death, wakefulness and sleep take place. Therefore, instead of applying conventions to anchor imagination through human-centered perspectives, Woolf creates scenes in which we as readers can trace the route that imagination takes and observe its traits. In other words, the treacherous aspect of imagination explains why from the very beginning of "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," the inner thoughts and feelings of the nurse, the only human character, are displaced linguistically. It also explains why her interiority and subjectivity must be indirectly narrated by a narrative voice that does not occupy a position but has rather an "'ex-position,' a placing, positing, or positioning outside, a 'dis-place-ment'" (Miller s68). This unowned voice tells us that in real life, Lugton is mortally afraid of animals and insects, and the curtain she makes is for Mrs. Jasper Gingham, perhaps the mistress she currently works for (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 155). It also tells us what happens after Lugton is asleep, and it vividly describes animals' movements in detail. As it says,

> The elephants drank; and the giraffes snipped off the leaves on the highest tulip trees; and the people who crossed the bridges threw bananas at them, and tossed pineapples up into the air, and beautiful golden rolls stuffed with quinces and rose leaves, for the monkeys loved them. (155)

This quotation clearly expresses how much time this narrative voice has spent with the animals. It knows their preference: monkeys do not love bananas, but quinces and rose leaves; it is giraffes that love bananas and pineapples.

In this story, Woolf relies on a great number of vision- and sound-related verbs (such as "hear" and "see") to suggest that the voice, or broadly construed, the text can also think and feel just like human beings. For instance, after

Lugton sleeps, the voice says, "the trees waved; you could hear the water of the lake breaking; and see the people moving over the bridge and waving their hands out of the windows" (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 154). The subtechniques in this quote that solicit the reader to follow the consciousness of the voice include the use of the second-person pronoun ("you") and present participles (breaking, moving, waving), both of which cause a sense of here and now. The former technique emphasizes that the voice can address the reader as a polite, if not enthusiastic, interlocutor in a conversation, whereas the latter successfully directs the reader's attention to the movements of the animals that it is depicting, making the scene grotesquely vigorous and playful. However vigorous, sanguine and hedonistic the scenes might seem, the literary effect they create is anamorphic and monstrous. This is because, as argued earlier, this voice occupies an unidentified space of dis-position, which oscillates between the subject of enunciation (it, or a void of the text that belongs to nobody) and the subject of statement ("you" as the reader, Lugton and those intangible animals), between the consciousness of the text and the void that this voice speaks from (which we the readers can never occupy). Most importantly, the transposition of the scenes is premised on the fact that animals are dead and lifeless when they are sewn on the curtain.

Most of the time, we the readers just follow the steps and perspective of this narrative voice to silently and detachedly watch what these animals go through: to come to the lake to drink, to reach the small town, and to join the royal parade with town residents. However, the narrative voice inadvertently reveals its interiority twice. The first time is when it clearly conveys its amazement at the potentiality of Lugton's vigorous imagination. As it says,

> Really, it was a beautiful sight—and to think of all this lying across old Nurse Lugton's knees while she slept, sitting on her Windsor chair in the lamplight—to think of her apron covered with roses and grass, and with all these wild beasts trampling on it, when Nurse Lugton was mortally afraid even of poking through the bars with her umbrella at the Zoo! (V. Woolf, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" 154-55)

The interiority of this voice is revealed to the reader: it appreciates the effort that Lugton has put into her manual work. It also recognizes this beautiful

curtain as an important material through which the potentiality of nonhuman life can be expressed. The second time is when this narrative voice shows its sympathy for the animals in its empathetic tone and the choice of lexicon at the end of the story. It unremittingly foregrounds the enormous contrast in size and power between Lugton and the animals: "[n]obody harmed the lovely beasts; many pitied them; for it was well known that even the smallest monkey was enchanted. For a great ogress had them in her toils, the people knew; and the great ogress was called Lugton" (155). In contrast to Lugton, who is "great" in size and who has a rough and aged face "like the side of a mountain with great precipices and avalanches, and chasms for her eyes and hair and nose and teeth," the animals are "small," "lovely" and deserve the reader's sympathy (155). They are so vulnerable that only "when she [Lugton] fell asleep, then [were] they released, and down they came in the evening to Millamarchmantopolis to drink" (155).

The renderings of the narrative voice's exclamation and sorrow demonstrate to what degree it is impossible for the reader to rely on any human-centered perspective or conventional framework to read the story. As argued earlier, imagination only appears when the Brownian oscillations between life and death, wakefulness and sleep take place, when Lugton's consciousness is displaced and withdrawn into a nonhuman narrative voice, and when animals' presence as always an absence is made known to the reader through Woolf's language. Free indirect discourse discloses its importance: it allows the consciousness not of the character but of the text to flow and to be perceived by the reader, and the third-person past tense foregrounds the incapacity of human beings to pin down imagination directly.[4] We toil after it; but in return, it sneers at us and says, "'My name is Brown. Catch me if you can'" (V. Woolf, "Mr. Bennett" 193). When we finally reach it, it already has gone away. Czarnecki also emphasizes the incongruence between the human-centered perspective and

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[4] For Evelyn T. Chan, a third-person narrator still moderates the storytelling in free indirect discourse (hence indirect), but sometimes, characters' inner thoughts might leak and are sensed by the reader (hence free) (31). However, in my analysis, what differentiates "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" from other Woolfian stories is that there is no character's consciousness on which the reader can draw (hence free). In addition, it is not so much a narrator's consciousness that moderates the storytelling as the scenes created by free indirect discourse that disclose themselves cinematically/automatically. And yet, there is still a narrative voice that narrates the story and it has its own preferences and emotions (hence indirect). As argued in my paper, this is because the imagination to which Lugton is blind can only be rendered vivid when there is no human-centered perspective to dominate the story.

the elusive imagination. In her analysis, Lugton has to sleep so that her creation can exist without any egoism imposed by the author (224).

In this way of thinking, it is tremendously important that Lugton's curtain is half-finished because it makes present the trace of imagination (the sewn part in her curtain), but it also signifies the prospect of seeing imagination realized one day (the unsewn part, or the part that Lugton is sewing). Just as Woolf does in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," Nurse Lugton's curtain presents scenes in which the completed part of the sewing always mirrors the unfinished or active process of the sewing, i.e., the potentiality of the life force or the robust imagination that is the starting point of every creation.

V. Conclusion

As one of Woolf's oft-read authors, Browne might have influenced her with his ruminations on the dialectics between life and death, wakefulness and sleep when she wrote "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." As a playful text that is usually categorized in the children's literature section, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" might not be as playful and jubilant as it seems. On closer scrutiny, it oscillates between life and death, wakefulness and sleep, and reminds us how rare it is when imagination, incarnated as animals in the story, is present, since most of the time, humans are either blind to it or have killed it already. In this light, one way to render imagination is to conceal human-centered perspectives in the text and to present scenes in which the route that animals move or the trail that imagination treads can be perceived by the reader.

The skill of free indirect discourse reveals its importance: by minimizing human-centered perspectives, imagination can be rendered vividly without being subject to any literary convention (another sense of being free). Even though the textual perspective of the narrating-narrated voice is the mechanism on which the reader relies (hence indirect), Woolf has kept the subjectivity of this voice at a minimum. And yet, by secretly narrating itself into the story, this voice makes present scene after scene so that we are following the flow of imagination (not Lugton's, not Woolf's, but of the text itself). This is Woolf's experimental endeavor to catch animals—or Mrs. Brown, another incarnation of imagination, who always frowns upon and "combats a literal-minded, end-seeking, [and] purposeful reading" (Caughie 4).

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