

The phenomenological whole
Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's innovative formal strategies create an awareness of multiple animate beings within thick, sensory layers of earthly flesh. E.M. Forster was one of the first scholars to note the significance of Woolf's use of embodied perception. In a lecture he gave in 1942, only one year after she committed suicide, Forster pays tribute to Woolf's sensual descriptions:

Food with her was not a literary device put in to make the book seem real. She put it in because she smelt the flowers, because she heard Bach, because her senses were both exquisite and catholic, and were always bringing her first-hand news of the outside world. Our debt to her is in part this: she reminds us of the importance of sensation in an age which practices brutality and recommends ideals.¹

As Forster notes, Woolf's palpable depictions of bodily, gustatory life not only create vivid prose, they also subtly remind us of the primacy of the body, its ability to enrich meaning, its locus of joys, its susceptibility of pain, and the dangers we invite when we reject our knowledge of the embodied world in favor of a presumption of intellectual detachment. Forster also describes rereading her work as an experience that reminds him of organic profusion: "She is like a plant which is supposed to grow in a well-prepared garden bed – the bed of esoteric literature – and then pushes up suckers all over the place, through the gravel of the front drive, and even through the flagstones of the kitchen yard."² Here, Forster metaphorically aligns Woolf's writing with wild growth. Although Forster's assessment emphasizes the qualities of embodied perception and environmental awareness in her work, those attributes went largely unexamined by literary critics until the 1990s.

In recent decades, Woolf scholarship has shown a renewed interest in her representations of the natural world. Gillian Beer made the first significant foray in her book, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*

(1996). Christina Alt's *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (2010), Bonnie Kime Scott's *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Uses of Nature* (2012), and Derek Ryan's *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* (2013) are also preeminent examples. Beer reminds readers of Woolf's interest in theories of evolution, prehistory, science, and physics – areas that directly impact her depiction of humans within a larger contiguous environment. Alt carefully traces how Woolf explored natural history as a child and later favored more life-oriented biological sciences over taxonomic classifications that promoted patriarchal models of categorizing knowledge. Merging biography, feminist studies, and ecocriticism, Bonnie Kime Scott unveils new details about how Woolf's family influenced her interest in the natural world and her own relationships with gardens and pets to suggest how Woolf breaks down the dualism of nature and culture. Ryan argues that Woolf enacts new materialism's theoretical precepts by "illuminating materiality as precisely the possibility of being: the becoming of the material world,"³ using ideas articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, among others, and applying them to Woolf's representations of gender, nature, and the nonhuman. Louise Westling persuasively demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology elucidates Woolf's concern with the larger universe of human and nonhuman forces in her article, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" (1999) and Westling's recent explication of the breadth of Merleau-Ponty's work in *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (2014) fortifies many philosophical connections between Merleau-Ponty and Woolf. Even Alexandra Harris's illuminating exploration of nostalgia, nature, and creativity in *Romantic Moderns: Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (2010), a text that does not explicitly use ecocriticism as its theoretical basis, clearly has questions of environmental representation as its centerpiece, and Harris writes about Woolf with green in her ink. She reminds us of Woolf's "deep acquaintance with the Sussex landscape" and the significance of that relationship in understanding the tone of her final novel: "She delights in the naming of fields and villages, and in the rehearsal of local knowledge. For all its sadness, this novel is also Woolf's intense celebration of her countryside."⁴ And, reprising Forster's assessment, Harris notices "She is often discussed in terms of ethereality, but she is a passionate food writer. Even her most abstract novel, *The Waves*, is set largely in restaurants, amid crumbs and greasy knives and the very physical paraphernalia of eating."⁵ Using these readings as a starting point, my aim is to synthesize and add to them by highlighting an appreciation of how Woolf employs anthropomorphism, formal hybridity,

shifting perspective, and fragmented language to create embodied representations that unsettle Cartesian duality and prioritize alternative modes of knowing that reorient human assumptions of power. As Woolf crafts her prose, it manifests the interrelated existence of humans and nature, creating an ecophenomenological representation of an embodied existence intertwined with a more-than-human sensory world. Animal studies and ecomaterialism also provide insight into the significance and effect of her representations of nonhuman subjectivity and agency. Woolf's interconnectedness is distinct from a nineteenth-century desire to become one with nature or transcend nature; nonhuman animals and the environment do not simply mirror human emotion in Woolf's fiction. Instead, they are in a shared relationship; the nonhuman world is given a voice with which to speak back to humans, frequently criticizing human actions and ideas.

Mark Hussey was one of the first to link Woolf with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in *The Singing of the Real World* (1986). While Hussey focuses more on how Merleau-Ponty intersects with Woolf's efforts to define the individual identity, rather than the environment, Hussey is also consistently emphasizing the way the self is defined by the crowding of forces, and, alternatively, the experience of "a lack, by a sense of an abstract 'gap' in being that cannot be directly referred to in language, but which is certainly a potential of human experience,"⁶ implying the significance of a more-than-human world that the self defines itself against and within. For Hussey, Woolf's representation of the distance one feels which denies the fulfilling sense of complete knowledge or intimacy with another creates a fear and pessimism within her work – a dark and silencing "bewilderment in the face of human relations and a longing for knowledge and intimacy."⁷ Yet, though his interpretive emphasis falls more on the down-beats than the up-swings of the pendulum of Woolf's phenomenology, he also acknowledges "Woolf's concern in [*Between the Acts*] is with the voice of the artist, and with the original 'song,' inspired by the natural world, from which literature, she speculates, is developed. She sees 'common emotion,' a unified source of common belief, as the heart of literature."⁸ I would argue that it is the very meta-linguistic quality Woolf's art evasively glimpses which constitutes her representation of nonhuman consciousness—an effort to imagine the mind of matter as it courses through the text of our lives as weather, unfurling leaves, and the uncertain message of birdsong. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, a line of a Tennyson poem, "We perished, each alone" is related to a mutilated fish at the end of a fisherman's line, both tugging at associations of violence in the human and non-human realms; and in *Between the Acts*, an airplane and a moo enact

impulses of slicing and suturing the pageant's dialogue, all of which Woolf knits into prose that depicts a world alive with more-than-human actors. Thus, in Woolf's work, it is possible to understand the places where she inscribes the limits of understanding the human self or the moments of "failed" human community, as the invitation to recognize other nonhuman communities we already belong to, but don't allow to suffuse our sense of being. Hussey hints at the potential in the depictions of a gap or a rift: "thought folds back on itself when face to face with this metalinguistic 'reality'; it cannot be thought about; the circle cannot be escaped. It is perhaps Woolf's inability to put in actual terms what she means by 'reality,' beauty, and soul that gives the 'philosophy' implicit in the novels its essentially religious character."⁹ Similarly, in a more recent essay, he links Woolf with Merleau-Ponty to show that she is "an artist of emptiness and silence who tries again and again to enact in her fiction the uncanniness of being . . . moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness" that are "enigmatic articulations that cannot be easily translated into narrative form."¹⁰ I posit that this "religious character" or artistry of "silence" in "enigmatic form," which forms the basis of the experience of reading Woolf, is created by Woolf's experiments with an unexpected environmental consciousness infusing the material world with subjectivity that intermingles with representations of human experience and thought. The "other" the "self" is in relationship with is an animate world of multilinguistic potential. There is another layer of community available to human characters; one that may bring with it a shock of awareness evading perfect intimacy, but yet because of that very friction, fosters artistic efforts to bring the nonhuman world into dialogue with the human experience. Westling describes Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology in ways that uncannily resemble Hussey's description of Woolf, but, as I am developing, register it as a surfeit of awareness rather than a lack: "Human language intensifies this coiling back of self-reflection by allowing us to articulate the meanings we find sedimented in our experience, as language is itself a long cultural accumulation of significations, and "even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being. All creatures without voices articulate their sedimented experiences in ways we only faintly understand."¹¹ Similarly, the exertion of reaching and striving across the barrier between nonhuman sentience and human language becomes a potential source of inspiration, sustaining Woolfian characters through the inevitable void of fears created by mortality and loneliness to suggest a new kind of potential for membership in a wider community of cyclical creativity. It is still a relationship of tension – recognition of the palpating

world around us also requires giving up stable notions of the self as authoritative and authoring. As Gillian Beer has pointed out, Woolf engages with the loss of religion and permanence that Darwin's evolutionary science inaugurated, but the "need to discover origins" and the distress of was "*allayed* for Virginia Woolf by her awareness of the survival of prehistory. The continued presence of sea, clouds, leaves, stones, the animal form of man, the unchanged perceptual intensity of the senses, all sustain her awareness of the simultaneity in the present moment."¹² By reassessing the sensory aspects of her work – the same aspects that Forster celebrated in 1942 – we enrich our understanding of how Woolf manipulates images of unconscious felt connection, environmental stimuli, and the surge of natural forces. The nonhuman environment is registered not merely as a reminder of inevitable destruction and loss, but also as a stimulating, liberating space of potential transformation and continuance.

Woolf's personal diaries and nonfiction essays provide insight into her embodied renderings of the environment and its impact on her fiction. Woolf's autobiographical writings affirm how the larger natural world informs her self-identity and her literary imagination. Her diaries are replete with keen observations about the weather, which plant species are in bloom, and the habits of local birds. These passages are often the most lyrical sections of the entries. As she notes whom she has seen during the day or what she has done, the prose is often perfunctory; it seems to be rushed through like a list of chores in comparison with the way she lingers over her natural observations. The distinction is apparent in an entry dated March 3, 1920:

Then there was Roger's speech at the Club and my first effort – 5 minutes consecutive speaking – all very brilliant and opening the vista of the form of excitement not before glimpsed at. Dined with Nessa and Duncan in Soho. Saw the woman drop her glove. A happy ending. Eliot and Sydney dine – Sydney righting himself after our blow about Suffield – not without a grampus sigh or so – Then off to Monks – and here I should write large and bright about the SPRING. It has come. It has been with us over a fortnight. Never did a winter sleep more like an infant sucking its thumb. Daffodils all out; garden set with thick golden crocuses; snowdrops almost over; pear trees budding; birds in song; days like June with a touch of the sun – not merely a painted sky but a warm one. Now we've been to Kew. I assure you, this is the earliest and loveliest and most sustained spring I remember. Almond trees out.¹³

The significance she awards "SPRING" in all capital letters makes it literally blossom out from the page. The profusion of adjectives and

metaphors fully rounds out each image, suggesting her pleasure in this part of her daily experience. The final line is particularly sensual as the feel of the heat in a previous line, “not merely a painted sky but a warm one,” brings out the scent of almond blossoms, “Almond trees out.” These passages seem to have a direct correlation to the kinds of lush descriptions and sensory attention that distinguishes most of her literary work.

Indeed, some entries explicitly tie organic imagery to Woolf’s conception of creativity: “What was I going to say? Something about the violent moods of my soul. How describe them, even with a waking mind? I think I grow more and more poetic. Perhaps I restrained it, and now, like a plant in a pot, it begins to crack the earthenware. Often I feel the different aspects of life bursting the mind asunder” (June 21, 1924).¹⁴ The emotions she attempts to express through literary inspiration are likened to the wild growth of roots shattering the walls of decorative pots meant to neatly contain them. Similarly, Woolf was breaking free from Victorian prose by shattering old literary forms and by imagining a natural world that exists for its own sake, rather than merely to reflect a character’s internal emotions. A comparable analogy is at work when she criticizes Arnold Bennett’s prose in “Modern Fiction”: “There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there?”¹⁵ The tight floorboards, like the pot that Woolf imagines breaking, suggests formal rigidity that must be loosened or broken. By contrast, Woolf’s prose insists on the kinds of gaps and crevices that let life seep in.

Aware that she is in dialogue with the natural environment and other nonhuman voices, Woolf’s writing leaves spaces of silence and questioning for those presences to be registered. She consistently values humans not as a superior species, but as a single component jostling in an undulating network of larger natural forces. Her openness to other forms of sentience indicates a willingness to listen and perceive with humility. Woolf’s recollection of another particular afternoon as a young girl at St. Ives exemplifies the animate quality she perceives in the surrounding environment, particularly the living, changing skin of the apples and the interrogative mode of many “other than human forces”:

The lemon-coloured leaves on the elm trees, the round apples glowing red in the orchard and the rustle of the leaves make me pause to think how many other than human forces affect us. While I am writing this, the light changes; an apple becomes a vivid green. I respond – how? And then the little owl [makes] a chattering noise. Another response.¹⁶

Woolf writes “I respond – how?” as if the changing color of the apples was in itself a question posed by the natural surroundings. Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology explains that essential knowledge of an object or being can’t be perceived by immobilizing the subject “as with forceps” into a fixed meaning; instead, a more fundamental understanding of another being is only achieved by “someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return.”¹⁷ Woolf’s attitude “comprehend[s] perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it.”¹⁸ Similarly, ecomaterialism demands that we reorient our position to the organic matter of the world. Serpil Oppermann, punning on the preconditions of ethical “responsibility” explains: “Agency is about response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response.”¹⁹ Woolf’s writing suggests our own innate awareness of these more recently theorized premises. Rather than representing the world as a static background, or using it as a literary symbol, Woolf depicts the environment as a dynamic, fully rounded character in its own right. Further, the “little owl” responds to nature’s question before Woolf can frame her own response; the nonhuman presence reacts independently from and even more quickly than the human narrator. This kind of exchange resonates with ways Donna Haraway has defined the most productive kind of cross-species communication:

The truth or honesty of nonlinguistic embodied communication depends on looking back and greeting significant others, again and again. This sort of truth or honesty is not some trope-free, fantastic kind of natural authenticity that only animals can have while humans are defined by the happy fault of lying denotatively and knowing it. Rather, this truth telling is about co-constitutive natureculture dancing, holding in esteem, and regard open to those who look back reciprocally. Always tripping, this kind of truth has a multispecies future. *Respecere*.²⁰

Repeatedly, Woolf’s narrators are recording not only their own view of the nonhuman world, but also giving space to or “greeting” how the trees, the wind, the horse, the moth, the cow, or the spaniel interjects and changes the course of that understanding, cocreating a sense of shared experience, even if the human narrator can’t fully articulate or comprehend the nonhuman voice.

Yet Woolf and Merleau-Ponty both envision the potential of language to represent the embodied experience of a larger “whole” and the “dancing” “tripping” rhythms of its unexpected becomings. The words Merleau-Ponty claims most “closely convey the life of the whole” are not those with eloquently precise meanings, but rather the “brute,” “wild”

words that “energetically open upon Being” and “make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin”²¹ The parallel in Woolf’s work is unmistakable; she also claims that a work of art is not a creation of certain, single-minded solidity, but rather “a symmetry by means of infinite discords . . . some kind of whole made of shivering fragments.”²² Linking Merleau-Ponty’s theories to modernist forms, Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg affirm the potential of such ambiguity: “In the interstices of nothingness and meaninglessness there are vestigial moments of revelation. Negativity contains the seeds of liberation, and ultimately formulates its affirmative potential and creativity”²³ Moreover, depictions of momentary experiences of belonging and wholeness in Woolf’s work are often associated with the nonhuman realm. In fact, in many instances, physical sensations of sound, light, birds, trees, and waves are the agents that create the oscillating shivers of contraction and expansion between separateness and community.²⁴

Woolf as a green reader

Woolf’s frequent and elaborate critical treatment of how nature is represented in the works of *other* authors offers useful signposts for understanding her own goal of rendering the natural world accurately and actively. Indeed, her analyses of other literary texts in *The Common Reader* essays resemble what one might now identify as ecocritical readings. In an essay titled “Outlines” Woolf spends several sentences discussing the variety of snow that one would have experienced in the eighteenth century, and remarks: “Sufficient attention has scarcely been paid to this aspect of literature, which, it cannot be denied, has its importance. Our brilliant young men might do worse, when in search of a subject, than devote a year or two to cows in literature, snow in literature, the daisy in Chaucer and in Coventry Patmore.”²⁵ Following her own suggestion, she pays heed in “The Pastons and Chaucer” to Chaucer’s ability to bring forth all of nature’s vagaries: “Nature, uncompromising, untamed, was no looking-glass for happy faces, or confessor of unhappy souls. She was herself; sometimes, therefore, disagreeable enough and plain, but always in Chaucer’s pages with the hardness and freshness of an actual presence.”²⁶ Woolf’s analysis is an apt description of the kind of representation of Nature she favors in her own fiction, particularly the cows that play such a significant role in expressing the emotion of Ms. LaTrobe’s drama in *Between the Acts* and the way in which Woolf pronounces the mirror or looking-glass of Nature broken in *To the Lighthouse*.

In a similarly revealing review, Woolf claims that what makes Tolstoy “the greatest of all novelists,”²⁷ is that he proceeds, “as we are accustomed to proceed, not from the inside outwards, but from the outside inwards.”²⁸ In other words, environmental and physical stimuli often prompt the internal thoughts of his characters. The “we” in the phrase “as we are accustomed to proceed” seems to embrace not only her audience of common readers but also modernist writers interested in recording daily experiences, as her fiction will also document. As Alexandra Harris notes, even in Woolf’s unfinished drafts of “Reading at Random,” intended to be a second chapter of her *Common History* book, she is attentive to the significance of how writers use daily interactions with nature to draw forth universal experience by “linking books back to the solid, daily world from which they grew. She imagined writers walking along the same paths as their readers, worried about the same things, looking out on the same view.”²⁹ Thus, what Woolf finds interesting in Tolstoy is a sense of the embodied perception of ordinary experience. Thoughts are sparked by nudges received from the outside world of physical contact – a fire lit by the rub of sensation upon the flint of individual consciousness. According to Woolf, this kind of vivacity is particularly keen in the context of Tolstoy’s use of nature within urban experiences of place:

He is metropolitan, not suburban. His senses, his intellect, are acute, powerful, and well nourished. There is something proud and superb in the attack of him. Nothing glances off him unrecorded. Nobody, therefore, can so convey the excitement of sport, the beauty of horses, and all the fierce desirability of the world to the senses of a strong young man. Every twig, every feather sticks to his magnet.³⁰

Such attention to the sensory impact of the environment on the thoughts and actions of characters similarly manifests itself in Woolf’s work and recalls her admonition to modern writers in “Modern Fiction”: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” Every physical sensation, whether it is “every twig, every feather” or even the smallest measurable matter science has identified, every “atom,” is part of the internal compositional score of the artist, created by the interplay of nature, perception, and thought.

The Second Common Reader is similarly illuminating. In “The Novels of Hardy” she describes Thomas Hardy as “a minute and skilled observer of nature; the rain, he knows, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable; he

knows that the wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is aware, in a larger sense of Nature as a force.”³¹ As she did with Chaucer, Woolf commends Hardy’s representation of Nature as an entity that is not mastered by humans. His emphasis on Nature refuses to mold itself into the contours of classical pastoralism, which Woolf describes metaphorically as an “English landscape painter, whose pictures are all of cottage gardens and old peasant women.”³² Instead she distinguishes Hardy from the paint-by-numbers set, insisting, “And yet what kindly lover of antiquity, what naturalist with a microscope in his pocket, what scholar solicitous for the changing shapes of language, ever heard the cry of a small bird killed in the next wood by an owl with such intensity?”³³ What Woolf admires in Hardy goes beyond his deft language and his detailed knowledge of habitat and zoology. She reserves her most profound praise for his ability to evoke a feeling of sympathy with other creatures, a communal representation of anguish, grief, or pain that is shared across species. This resembles what Haraway would call “respecere” or Barad “response-ability,” and what Merleau-Ponty might term the ability to “open upon being” but all of which turn on an insistence on reciprocity. Epiphanies of embodied perception are often a result of such moments of exchange and are vital to engendering such empathy. Hardy’s own term for such flashes of inspiration in his work, “moments of vision,”³⁴ has a similar ring with Woolf’s own interest in “moments of being.” Woolf’s term extends the emphasis on sight to a wider sensory experience, a more varied embodiment that she also found in Hardy’s fiction. Woolf expresses Hardy’s genius as “vivid to the eye, but not to the eye alone, for every sense participates, such scenes dawn upon us and their splendour remains.”³⁵

One of Woolf’s goals for modern fiction is to render an atmosphere that is charged with sensory stimulation more felt than understood. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty theorizes how unconscious embodied perception operates to imbue a sense of knowledge that can be shared and communicated, even if it can’t be clearly enunciated: “‘Private worlds’ [of separate individuals] communicate . . . The communication makes us the witness of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing. But in both cases, the certitude, entirely irresistible as it may be, *remains absolutely obscure*; we can live it, we can neither think it nor formulate it nor set it up in theses. . . . *It is just this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us.*”³⁶ In other words, feeling sensations of interrelationship with the world affirms something at our core as embodied beings in an

environment replete with other life, even if that experience evades articulation, and can only be hinted at in language – indeed the very elusiveness of the dynamic is part of its value. Woolf's pleasure in reading Hardy's best scenes stems from a similar sensation: "there is always about them a little blur of unconsciousness, that halo of freshness and *margin of the unexpressed which often produce the most profound sense of satisfaction.*"³⁷ In Woolf's view, depicting an embodied attentiveness to surroundings and other sentient life forms is a pivotal component for representing the nebulous life force of modern fiction. As described in "Modern Fiction," it is the idea that "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."³⁸ The stream of one's consciousness is always already surrounded, coursing through banks of palpable matter our bodies interact with and made up of other life teaming within it, as the way we think is linked to the atoms of matter we ingest, absorb, and filter that make the "whole" of a being something that can't quite be grasped, of which our articulable sense of self is only one part.

However, it would be a facile and all too utopian vision to assume that what Merleau-Ponty and Woolf are describing amounts to a harmonious unity. It is the incompleteness – feelings of failure, frustration, and alienation – that make these revelations about the glimpses of shared meaning so poignant. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "flesh of the world" has often been misunderstood as metaphor for seamless unification. Louise Westling corrects this oversimplification by referring us back to the way he describes the flesh as two hands:

And yet this reversibility is "always imminent and never realized in fact," so that there is no coincidence or merging but instead a divergence or "incessant escaping" (*écart*) that prevents the exact superimposition on one another of "the touching of the things by my right hand and the touching of this same right hand by my left hand." Similarly the relation of any creature to others within the flesh of the world is never fully realized or identical; this dehiscence or *écart* generates differentiation even as the intertwining of things and creatures ensures their kinship.³⁹

The chiasm and intertwining Merleau-Ponty describes as the basis for ecophenomenological awareness is echoed by recent ecomaterialist philosophy. As Serpil Oppermann describes, ecomaterialism seeks to construct a sense of more-than-human interconnectivity while still pointing to the spanner that resists full coalescence and insists on the presence of difference: "Considering the material and the discursive together does not mean, according to [Karen] Barad, 'collapsing important differences between

them,’ but means ‘allowing any integral aspects to emerge.’ This is diffractive thinking – thinking concepts and matter through one another – that material ecocriticism holds crucial in bridging the divide between matter and its social constructions, and in positing the co-presences and coevolution of humans and nonhumans.”⁴⁰ This manifestation of doubt and amazement that is not readily filled – as it all too often *is* in the annals of human history and fictional narrative, with the authoritative voice pronouncing, defining, and claiming – forms a crucial aspect of Woolf’s ecocritical analysis of others and her own writing techniques. The literary practice of allowing room for the not-fully-understood in descriptions of palpable interaction with the nonhuman world – affirming it without erasing its evasiveness, and honoring the uncertainty without negating its meaning – nurtures an environmental consciousness based in ethical relationships. Woolf’s fascination with nature and her enthusiasm for sensory renderings of the nonhuman in the work of other authors solicits a green reading of how this environmental ethic is achieved in her own work.

Humans and nonhumans in “Kew Gardens,” *Flush*, and “Thunder at Wembley”

In some of Woolf’s work, nonhuman animals assume key roles, with a status equivalent to their human counterparts. Thus Woolf implies their independent agency and a lateral, rather than hierarchical, relationship to the human species. As Hardy rendered the plaintive anguish of the small bird facing its predator, Woolf incisively describes the emotional responses of other animate beings. Her depictions of their delight, terror, anger, and affection entreat the reader to value nonhuman experience as diverse and meaningful. As a result, her representations of nonhuman life create a larger sense of community with animals while also critiquing presumed rights of dominion over “others” inherent in British culture.

“Kew Gardens” (1919) is one of the works by Woolf that has been consistently noted for its unique treatment of the nonhuman, as represented by this assessment of John Oakland: “The fusing processes, particularly that of human with non-human, break down differentiation in the establishment of inter-related harmonies.”⁴¹ Yet early environmental appraisals such as Oakland’s have sometimes teetered on an overly celebratory peak: “There is nothing in the text to suggest that this qualitative movement towards unity is anything but harmonious and optimistic.”⁴² While the story does evoke unity, it also recalls the First World War and

reveals tensions in gender relations. The theme of balance and Woolf's formal experimentation in prose are anticipated by the story's original cover art. The first edition copy of "Kew Gardens" at Washington State University's archive, which resembles many of the first-edition Hogarth prints of "Kew Gardens," is a small pamphlet with a hand-painted paper cover. It has a solid black background that has been brushed over the entire cover, a reminder of the story's backdrop of war. The black paint is topped with splotches of bright cobalt blue, orange, and a shade of purple made from a combination of the other two colors. The presentation of the cover suggests the story's prose technique, which features a fragmented style and opposes clear, realist representation. Similarly, references to the flowers at Kew are splashed throughout the prose with reappearing descriptions of their light and color. This first edition also contains a woodcut by Vanessa Bell mingling figures of people with flowers, presenting the figures slightly elongated and askance, as if from an unfamiliar vantage point. The perspective of the story is also unexpectedly skewed as the action of human characters is presented from the point-of-view of a snail. This unlikely protagonist is attempting to resolve the conflict of how to make its way through an oval flowerbed. Between segments focusing on the snail, the reader is introduced to four sets of couples strolling past the snail's garden plot. Edward Bishop has convincingly argued that the four couples represent middle, upper, and lower class, maturity, old age, and youth, as well as relations between husband and wife, male companions, female friends, and young lovers,⁴³ emphasizing the way in which both the flora one finds at Kew Gardens and humanity itself are organized into classification systems.

Postcolonial ecocritics reference Kew Royal Botanical Gardens in asserting the significant link to the "language of taxonomy, discipline, and control" and cultural traditions of ranking organic and human species: "Just as the British Museum and Kew Gardens were constituted by the flora, fauna, and human knowledges extracted from the colonies, the discourse of natural history was articulated in terms of biotic nations, kingdoms, and colonists . . . contributing to biologically determinist discourses of race, gender, and nature."⁴⁴ In "Kew Gardens" Woolf seems aware of this propensity, denying the experience of Kew as a colonial display-case of sanctioned movement and classification by reclaiming it as a site of overlapping intersubjectivity using imagistic parallels that highlight gradations of similarity, rather than hierarchies of difference. Woolf's rendering of Kew Royal Botanical Gardens as an abstraction of fused color, light, and water, with zooified representations of people and prominent nonhuman characters, directly subverts the usual cultural depictions of

such a highly ordered, hierarchical place. Bonnie Kime Scott clarifies that Woolf's early experiences with gardens as prescribed therapy, before Kew became a regular feature of her life with Leonard in Richmond, might have made it a site for considering dynamics of ordered control in contravention with experiences of organic entanglement and transformation: "assigned gardening as a form of therapy, she could also use the garden to express ways that she felt coerced or regulated," suggesting that Woolf "learned that gardening was largely a matter of control, and that this struggle among genders, plants, and animals was part of what she wanted to record."⁴⁵ Similarly, in "Kew Gardens" fractured language and miniature plots playfully trick logical conformity and traditional literary practice as the omniscient narrator only presents what goes on within the snail's vicinity and human voices are reduced to bits and scraps of conversation.

The reader enters the snail's world with dramatic shifts in scale. Initially, the flowers are described as if the reader was him or herself walking past, admiring the summer blooms: "From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface."⁴⁶ The reader's gaze is then drawn down deeper, beneath the petals, which are now appreciated from overhead: "The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue, and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour."⁴⁷ Just as Woolf sought to record "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" in "Modern Fiction," here she follows the pattern of dappled light as it illuminates the tissue of living matter:

The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of a pebble, or shell of a snail with its circular veins, or, falling into a raindrop, it expanded . . . The light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves.⁴⁸

Alt notes how Woolf "is drawn from classification to observation" in stories such as "The Death of the Moth" and "Kew Gardens"; reflecting Woolf's increasing interest in an account of nature that incorporates ethology's awareness that "the significance of any creature is most fully realised when it is observed as a living thing within its natural surroundings."⁴⁹ Here, that approach is exemplified in the way the snail is

embedded within a fully animate environment and operates as a moving, living creature, rather than an inert being. The literary application of this intense form of lived observation changes the perception of scale and creates a new consciousness of the lived, bodily sensorium. In terms of ecophenomenology, an attentiveness to perspective and the senses prompts embodied awareness:

To learn to see colours is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image. Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an "I think", it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium. Sometimes a new cluster of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning.⁵⁰

Again, the echo of these ideas in ecomaterialist theory is striking:

Like taste, or sound, or smell, color results from the combination of physics and physiology. Therefore if "grey is the fate of colors at twilight," (qting, "Grey" by Cohen) color, generally taken, is the fate of light when it meets the eye. It is the fate of physics meeting physiology. It is the way waves of energy get hybridized with hybrid layers of biology, stepping from the unseen to the visible.⁵¹

By twining these two, old and new, theories with Woolf's fictional devices, the way they all "point at" a similar philosophy orienting us to see our "reality" as a fabric of matter that participates in creating the "meaning" we read into ourselves and the world becomes more apparent. Woolf uses prose to evoke an artistic aesthetic that brings together a "fresh sensory entity" of garden and a new "richer meaning" of a shared organic world. Her writing moves away from the "I think" by encouraging the reader to "acquire a certain style of seeing" uniting images, light, and associations that require the reader to integrate "the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity."

The play of light, atmosphere, and matter is linked to the very basis of thought through Woolf's suggestive comparison of verdant undergrowth and active, embodied brain. She describes the light as it traces patterns in "flesh" and "veins," of succulent green tissue that also resembles a circuited mind in its "branching thread of fibre beneath the surface." The multiple references to the leaves that are "heart-shaped and tongue-shaped" with "throats" also correlates organic and human flesh, and refers subtly to language, specifically the kind of words that "reveal the flickerings of that

innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain.”⁵² Similarly, the thoughts of the human characters will be illuminated in seemingly random patterns of revelation and memory. The human body and the organic matter are coalesced in these images. It is the variants of this interactive play of light, flower, scale, and sensory memory that becomes story. Or, as Serenella Iovino describes it, “Material ecocriticism takes matter as a text, as a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed.”⁵³ The garden as a text of colonial classification reclaimed by a renewed awareness of the vibrancy of overlooked life and the interconnected narratives of human and nonhuman beings makes embodied knowledge and minute matter meaningful. The fact that Woolf was representing such understandings in tandem with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy or prior to new materialism’s theoretical arrival is not as important for its chronological coup as it is for how it reminds us that environmental consciousness is always already part of us, and is carried forth through our continued efforts to make it culturally visible.

Changes in perspective and scale emphasize that all beings are embedded in the thickness of the physical world. Using a stone wall as his example, Merleau-Ponty explains what happens to the body when we allow our gaze to be absorbed by a close object: “There is no longer even a stone there, but merely the play of light upon an indefinite substance.”⁵⁴ Woolf’s morphing description of falling light in “the vast green spaces” beneath the leaves enacts this kind of engrossed gaze. However, when one’s body moves through space, one’s understanding of visual objects also shifts. Woolf’s description of light moves upward again from the dappled caverns of the undergrowth: “Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July.”⁵⁵ The reader is shunted from an absorbed view of the undergrowth back to the perspective of the humans walking above the flowers, fostering a recognition of the depth and space of world we move within and the variety of lives that experience it from differing subjective planes. Thus, in one opening paragraph, Woolf destabilizes the reader’s sense of scale, suggesting that there is life worth recording not only from our own perspective, but also from the viewpoint of insects and snails, all interlaced within the world’s thick flesh.

Woolf identifies humans and language with natural phenomena throughout the story. The first couple who meander past the flowerbed is a husband and wife who recollect their first encounters with love.

The man is caught in a reverie about Lily, the woman who refused his proposal of marriage years earlier; her name is another mingling of humans/flowers. The man encapsulates his memory of the rejection with the image of Lily's impatient "square silver shoe-buckle and a dragon fly,"⁵⁶ an image that stresses form and organicity. Although this memory interjects another woman between the married pair, the wife seems past any jealous provocation. Whether the wife's equanimity is the product of serene security or tired indifference is uncertain: "Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees . . . ghosts [of] one's happiness, one's reality?"⁵⁷ Woolf affirms the power of setting to inspire self-reflection, illuminating the layers of self-identity and sentiment brought up from the muddy depth of memory and suddenly flashed into consciousness. The wife shares her own emblem of love and happiness, which is also pointedly not part of the past she shares with her husband. Hers is a childhood joy, a memory of "the mother of all my kisses of all my life"⁵⁸ – the unexpected kiss of a grey-haired art instructor on the back of her neck when she was only a girl. While the recollections are not about each other, sharing them renews a sense of the couple's intimacy. The pattern of their movement changes correspondingly. At the outset of the interlude the man is walking "six inches in front of the woman,"⁵⁹ a distance he maintains "purposely,"⁶⁰ but as they depart the woman calls the children to them and they walk "four abreast." They are physically reunited as they are blended back into the story's canvas and reduced to figures that reenact the previous description of the snail: "[They] soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches."⁶¹ Embodied awareness of environmental stimuli pricks memory, the characters communicate this to each other, and then they are absorbed back into the larger communicative efforts of the story's themes of balance. Indeed the "irregular patches" describe bits of human dialogue as well as the moving pools of sunlight.

Thus while Oakland is correct in his assessment that the story evinces unity, it would be unnecessarily reductive to equate this blending of human and organic life with a denial of human (and nonhuman) hardship or loss. These aspects are also present, although their threat is folded into the other unifying impulses of the garden so that these darker tones have their place in the balance of the whole. Even the snail's progress is impeded by difficulties of circumventing "crumbs of loose earth" or "vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture."⁶² Although the snail finally decides to go under rather than atop or around a major obstacle, the story doesn't

allow the reader to see the snail reach its goal. The snail's decision-making during its journey may have been influenced by Frederick Gamble's claims about animal consciousness in *The Animal World* (1911), a book the Woolfs owned. "Above all," wrote Gamble, "there is in a [non-human] being not only a certain awareness, but a certain power of choice, a certain independence when faced by a multitude of alternatives."⁶³ Woolf's depiction of the snail's independent agency might therefore not be solely fictional, but rather based on scientific descriptions of the possibilities of animal behavior. Woolf's world reflects that both humans and nonhumans have the capability for rational thought.

Like the snail, humans encounter difficulties too. Though the somber note of marital regret was only lightly sounded in the married couple's conversation, the two men who come along next recall the trauma of war. An old man is operating under delusions that recall shell-shock and grief. His conversation with "spirits of the dead" is punctuated by a cry of, "Women! Widows! Women in black – ."⁶⁴ His excitement is prompted by seeing a woman wearing a dress "which in the shade looked black."⁶⁵ Whether or not this refers to the two working women dressed in black who will saunter into range after this pair leaves is uncertain, just as a reference to an "old man" in the two women's dialogue will ambiguously recall the war veteran. Whether the characters are actually referring to each other doesn't prevent the association for the reader, however, who is continually provoked to make patterns from the apparent randomness. The old man's younger male companion "touch[es] a flower with the tip of his walking cane in order to divert the old man's attention."⁶⁶ Yet the flowers prove to be a diversion for several characters, not just the mentally unstable old man. The old man begins talking to the flower as if he could "answer a voice speaking from it."⁶⁷ The shape of the flower may resemble a conical earpiece that hangs on an upright receiver, suggesting that the man is imagining another human speaker. In any event, his experience of a direct, sentimental voice that can be understood as if one was speaking to a flower over the phone is initially made to look foolish. The reader only gets half of the old man's delusional conversation, but the experience of this kind of dislocation and fragmentation becomes normalized in the context of the story, which is replete with vague and unfinished dialogue. Unlike Septimus Smith, whose trauma is confirmed by shell-shocked visions of dogs and trees becoming figures of the risen dead in Regents Park, in "Kew Gardens" the mutability of human and nonhuman voices, and the ability of others to hear flowers or become flowers, is normalized as a common phenomenon, one that may sometimes be expressive of trauma, but is not

necessarily a sign or harbinger of mental distress as much as a daily experience of a world that is refracted and experienced in a multiplicity of ways. The possibility of shared communication between environment and perceiving human is not disparaged, but rather revised, by the next couple.

The idea of nonhuman communication is taken up again as another woman is engrossed by the flowers; but here the play of language renders dialogue as sensory, rather than literal. In the interlude that gives the reader the conversation of two working women, the pattern of the prose is meant to communicate a feeling rather than a precise or lucid meaning:

‘Nell, Bert Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says’
 ‘My Bert, Sis, Bill, Grandad, the old man, sugar,
 Sugar, flour, kippers, greens
 Sugar, sugar, sugar’⁶⁸

The “flour,” a homophone for “flower,” and the multiple connotation of “greens” as both salad leaves and the green color of the garden, mix the setting of Kew gardens into the woman’s rhetoric. The repetition of “I says” creates rhythm. The mere sound produced by the movement of the tongue, “say[ing],” like the tongue of the flowers, is emphasized over the direct narrative intelligibility of their discourse. This new sketch revises what seemed insanity in the old man and shows how disconnected thought, time, memory, and language are convoluted in “ordinary” ways as well. Meaning is sensually communicated through movement, sound, memories of people carried in the litany of names, and a certain sense of happiness created by the repetition of “sugar” and its associations with sweetness. One of the women even becomes a kind of flower as she looks at the flowerbed and listens to the friendly prattle: “The ponderous woman looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers standing cool, firm and upright in the earth, with a curious expression. . . . She stood letting the words fall over her, swaying the top part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers.”⁶⁹ The words become the “incessant shower” (“Modern Fiction”) “falling over her” to produce an unconscious lull in her attachment with the human world, allowing her to hear the pattern of words, and to express the physicality of the flowers as she sways her stalk-like body with the breeze.

Forms, both in language and human figure, are protean. As Westling explains, this idea is central to Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology as well: “It is in [*The Visible and the Invisible*] that he extended the embodied, gestural definition of speech from the earlier works into an ontological

description of language bubbling up from silence and reaching back into the Invisible to articulate meanings that are the lining and depth dynamically woven into the texture of social life with all its cultural accumulations, in a chiasmic overlapping with the visible world.⁷⁰ Woolf's writing makes these potential connections immanent. Woolf experiments with this understanding using language as a manifestation of traces of pre-reflexive experience, cultured thought, and intersubjective perspectives of shared world, not just in these bits of dialogue in "Kew Gardens" but as a recurring image of creativity and the "singing of the world" in other stories as well: the warbling voice of an old woman conflated with the bubbling of water from earth in *Mrs. Dalloway* or Miss La Trobe feeling the beginning of words for a new play effervescently surface as she drinks the fermenting malt of her beer toward the end of *Between the Acts*, for example. Miss La Trobe drowsily, drunkenly contemplates the origins of inspiration as "words of one syllable sank down into the mud . . . The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words."⁷¹ For Woolf, language, itself, is embedded in environmental sensations, a manifestation of humanness generated from a rich layered potential of communications that don't (yet) have human meaning, but are still innately part of more-than-human meaning-making. Personified and zooified descriptions, dialogue as rhythmic poetry, and sudden shifts in scale represent the "lining and depth" of experience "woven into the texture of social life" and consciousness. Just as Woolf was inspired by physics to consider the fluidity of world and matter, contemporary theorists of ecomaterialism use physics to remind us that "the universe of materiality is a crossroad of compound bodyminds" whose "copresence" is a kind of agency that "discloses concretely the internal relations in a storied world."⁷² Today, we might think of this coauthored material agency of world-making as the determinism of single-cell organisms, the swarming capacity of small fish, or the ability of photons to act as wave or particle or both, according to the presence of an observer, as shown in the double slit experiment.

In "Kew Gardens" the overlapping imagery, poetic dialogue, and the mesh of interwoven human and nonhuman narratives is achieved in tandem with controlled samples of gender, age, and class, as well as the central axis of the circular snail inside an oval flowerbed. Like the nest of Chinese boxes in an imperial garden, in turn enclosed by London, control and organicity productively tussle in a world that continues to move through time and memory, or stroll out of the range of local space. The patterns themselves are a product of flux – the cyclical change of life

as it is lived and the protean quality of shared thoughts as they struggle to find expression.

Embodied perception of the environment propels a back and forth of corporeal interplay between the last couple of young lovers. The two insinuate physically what they cannot yet verbalize or even consciously realize: "The couple stood still on the edge of the flower-bed, and together pressed the end of her parasol deep down into the soft earth. The action and the fact that his hand rested on top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way."⁷³ The symbolic union of their hands and coinciding penetration of fertile loam hints at the marital and sexual potential of their relationship, provoking them to think of concealed "precipices" and "something loom[ing]" behind their words. The sense of bodily awareness taps undercurrents of weighty thoughts; there is a physical sensory interaction with the environment and each other. The young man's response is to withdraw from the natural encounter – "he pulled the parasol out of the earth with a jerk and was impatient to find the place where one had tea with other people, like other people"⁷⁴ – whereas the woman wishes to engage the nonhuman world more fully – "trailing her parasol; turning her head this way and that way forgetting her tea, wishing to go down there and then down there, remembering orchids and cranes among wild flowers."⁷⁵ Their intercourse with the environment instigates a form of nonliteral communication.

The flowers and the atmosphere have combined to pollinate not only the implied sexual urges of the pair, but also the reader's awareness of the text's unique mode of perception. This short story has no linear narrative, no plot, and no clear climax; instead, as Edward Bishop points out, "the experience of reading ["Kew Gardens"] initiates, in the sensitive reader, a growth of perception."⁷⁶ The young couple exchanges vague words with unclear antecedents that nevertheless have meaning within the pattern of the story. The woman brushes aside her suitor's comment on the price of admission saying, "Isn't it worth sixpence?" to which he asks "What's 'it' – what do you mean by 'it'?"⁷⁷ The woman's response is unclear as she struggles to find words for the mood created by the garden: "O anything – I mean – you know what I mean."⁷⁸ But just as the woman resists putting a price on the experience, Woolf doesn't depreciate the value of ambiguous, half-formed language: "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."⁷⁹ Likening the small words to a bee laden with pollen, Woolf seems to suggest that these half-sensory,

half-literal gesticulations of communication approximate the gaps and pauses of illumination that pollinate or give creative meaning to ordinary experience. These fissures in form and language are what allow growth. Further, that growth is the development of an interplay of images and atmosphere rather than a clear narrative trajectory.

Woolf's modernist experiments with language invest language with a life of its own. In her essay "Craftsmanship" Woolf expresses the vivacious nature of her working material of words. Words, which she proclaims are "the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things,"⁸⁰ take on an independent life. They "live in the mind . . . variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together."⁸¹ She playfully acknowledges the limits of her own ability to pin (or pen) words down. She allows them the potential to have meanings beyond her immediate control as an author by depicting the tendency of language to change and develop as it lives in the mind of the writer as well as language's transformation when those words are read and absorbed into the minds of readers who may have a multitude of associations and meanings that "mate" and join with those words. Woolf recognizes the charge of this reciprocal openness to being not only in her own vivification of words, but also in the ability of the *words* to leave space for her to engage with *them*: "The test of a book (to a writer) [is] if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. . . . This proves that the book itself is alive: because it has not crushed the thing I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip it in, without any compression or alteration."⁸² Woolf allows language to form spontaneous or unexpected meanings, and in an equivalent sense a book is most "alive" by allowing her to engage with it and add her own words to the evolving product. Recent material ecocritical theorists such as Serenella Iovino recognize that this kind of interplay between an object and its lived experience creates a collaboration of meaning that is part of an environmentally aware perception: "Just as discourses might have material effects (e.g., in concepts and practices of marginalization, exploitation, or segregation), so matter discloses properties that prepare for the insurgence of discourses."⁸³ As a result of this kind of embodied knowledge, ideas and conceptions of our own "being" change: "The knower and the known are mutually transformed in the process of knowing, and new levels of reality emerge. Whether it involves cells or social practices, knowing is a material-discursive becoming. It transforms both the individuals and the world."⁸⁴ While I don't follow new materialists so far as to grant consciousness to inanimate objects, the interplay of material that itself undergoes processes

of transformation and impacts the processes of ecological growth and beings – both human and nonhuman – that do have consciousness can remind us of the coconstitutive significance of matter on both macro and micro scales. Woolf's work invites us to reorient our position in terms of flowers, insects, color, and even the pages we hold between our hands so that our own understanding of self in relation to these other subjects and objects is transformed, and new interpretations, new knowledges, perhaps some Woolf may not have even consciously intended, emerge. In some respect, all literature participates in this kind of process, but Woolf not only directly acknowledges the fluidity of such cocreation, but also attempts to find forms that open the "greeting" for new engagements with being to be made visible. As a result, Merleau-Ponty's brand of ecophenomenological perception and ecomaterialism provide another possible theory for the reflexive, participatory qualities that make modernist narratives uniquely "new."

Language is often identified as the dividing line separating humans from other animals. In "Kew Gardens" Woolf deemphasizes human language as the *sine qua non* by extending communication to include the exchange of nonverbal meanings. However, in other texts she bestows the power of human speech on animal characters. For some literary scholars such devices of personification constitute a pathetic fallacy, the term Ruskin invented to signify any attribution of human characteristics to "inanimate natural objects."⁸⁵ More often, conferring human language on animal characters is labeled anthropomorphic. As Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman identify, anthropomorphism is "usually applied as a term of reproach, both intellectual and moral."⁸⁶ Several scholarly works are dedicated to challenging this assumption. It is crucial to distinguish "anthropocentrism" – the assumption that human interests have a higher priority than those of nonhumans – from "anthropomorphism." According to Lawrence Buell, "anthropomorphism" is a more complex term wherein "an anthropocentric frame of reference," including personification, can "dramatize the claims or plight of the natural world" rather than merely projecting human desires upon nature.⁸⁷ The human author is still a mediating presence, but literary devices can be used to undermine and complicate human control.

Respecting the life of another living being in part depends upon a capacity for imaginative empathy – a variety of anthropomorphism that is not anthropocentric. Donna Haraway insists on a similarly open and empathetic engagement when she suggests what Jacques Derrida's philosophical inquiry into the gaze of his cat, described in *The Animal that*

Therefore I Am, lacked: “Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back.”⁸⁸ It is just that additional turn – extending to the nonhuman a sense of mutual respect and curiosity, provoking a dialogue that reaches toward understanding other forms of communication, emotion, and meaning – that distinguishes anthropomorphism from anthropocentrism. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman justify some forms of personification in writing about nonhuman animals. They note a shift away from representing animals as a group, both in literature and in other real-world contexts of science and animal activism, repudiating the practice of transposing onto species of animals symbolic human attributes such as bravery, cunning, or loyalty. Instead, the current trend is toward personifying individual animals. Thinking of particular animals as having personal idiosyncrasies is “the way naturalists who knew most and cared most for the animals discussed them” even in documentaries of experienced field biologists.⁸⁹ To take this approach is to consider “what it would be like to be that animal” in a way that “roughly parallels that between an introspective approach to human thought, in which the psychologist turns inward and examines the contents of his or her own consciousness as data for understanding the workings of human consciousness.”⁹⁰ Or, as Caroline Hovanec has documented, how subjective psychologists of the modernist era attempted to get at a better understanding of the questions they should ask about animal consciousness by a kind of cognitive ethology that was “attempting to articulate the experiences associated with sensory stimuli and instincts in animal minds,”⁹¹ including imaginative renderings: “[J.B.S.] Haldane and Woolf light on similar tropes as they continue to grapple with the question of how our own biological senses and mental structures determine the way in which we understand the world.”⁹² Despite the fact that we are now in the Anthropocene, our willingness to use the human capacity for thought and sensory experience to attempt to enter into a more ethical relationship with nonhumans is still a crucial device to advancing knowledge in literature, science, and philosophy.

Eileen Crist argues that an emotional continuum between humans and animals was a major piece of Darwin’s evolutionary biology, the particulars of which he elaborated in his 1872 work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, a text Woolf likely read. Darwin argued that human and animal domains were no longer separated by “essential difference.”⁹³ *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* furthers his view of an evolutionary continuity by showing that “evolutionary common descent entails

the probability that subjective phenomena are not the sole province of human beings.”⁹⁴ Crist explains that Darwin even goes so far as to argue that some “animals have powers of imitation, attention, memory, imagination (seen in animals’ dreaming), and reason.”⁹⁵ Notably, Darwin’s own pet dog is one animal frequently used as an example of how emotions are manifested through the dog’s gait as well as particular movements of the tail and mouth. Darwin notes how hair, posture, and ears change when the dog is approached by a stranger versus when it is approached by its master and “the body sinks downward or even crouches, and is thrown into flexous movements . . . his hair instantly becomes smooth; his ears are depressed and drawn backwards, but not closely to the head; and his lips hang loosely.”⁹⁶ Darwin uses specific observations of several species of animals in various circumstances as proof that many animals have voluntary physical movements that are used as gestural communications of emotion, similar to the way humans express feelings of despair, anger, or elation.

This same acute sensitivity to detail is apparent in Woolf’s biography of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s spaniel, Flush. The canine biography is based on Woolf’s historical research about Flush gleaned from Elizabeth and Robert Barrett-Browning’s letters. The factual information is, of course, generously padded with Woolf’s own fictional license. This is apparent even in the novel’s pictorial representations. Pinker, the dog Sackville-West gave Woolf in 1926, was used for the frontispiece photograph of Flush.⁹⁷ The dog is poised and alert across the period-costumed lap of a sitter whose face does not appear in the photograph. This staged portrait of Flush is presented along with other paintings of the real Miss Mitford and Mrs. Barrett-Browning. Genre-blending is a familiar tool in Woolf’s oeuvre. In *A Room of One’s Own* she imagined the life of Shakespeare’s sister to round out a polemical critique of a very real gender inequality. A similar amalgamation of realism and fantasy is pertinent to Woolf’s activist critique in *Flush*.

On one hand (or paw), *Flush* is a playful novel that amused a large reading audience when it was published in 1933.⁹⁸ The mass acclaim was dubiously received by admirers of her previously published novels and all but extinguished close critical scrutiny of *Flush* for several decades.⁹⁹ However, the expanding field of animal studies led many scholars to give this slim novel a second sniff in the early years of the twenty-first century. Criticism gravitates toward two concerns often discussed as if they are competing claims. One approach attempts to get past the “comedy”¹⁰⁰ of the canine aspects of the text in order to rehabilitate what is seen as the

novel's primary interest in using a dog's life to allegorize weighty issues related to gender, class, and race.¹⁰¹ Another common reading explicitly sets aside the human social implications of the text, prioritizing instead how the novel depicts "the actuality of an animal's consciousness."¹⁰² I am indebted to both of these approaches, but propose they should be considered as interrelated rather than interpretations that are at odds. *Flush* resists settling into taking either humans or animals as its primary subject, but rather romps through the contact zone of the relationship between them, tracking what humans should learn about their limited subjective understanding of all "others," as well as how to respect and value difference.

In the oft-quoted passage when Flush and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are first introduced to one another, Woolf represents the scene as one of mutual acknowledgment – an open perceiving of one another with the intent to truly experience the resulting sensations and emotions:

'Oh, Flush!' said Miss Barrett. For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright; his mouth wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I – and then each felt: But how different! . . . Could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been – all that; and he – But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. Then with one bound Flush sprang on to the sofa and laid himself where he was to lie for ever after – on the rug at Miss Barrett's feet.¹⁰³

The reciprocity of their gaze is initially rendered as an assessment of equal curiosity on the part of woman and dog. Merleau-Ponty explains that "the tactile palpitation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which the palpitation of the eye is a remarkable variant"¹⁰⁴ is the kind of intense, interrogative looking that promotes understanding between two beings. Donna Haraway, writing more specifically about the relationship between humans and the animals they live with, explains the mutual exchange as learning about a being we will come to love: "We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical

aberration and a *naturalcultural* legacy.”¹⁰⁵ The third person narrator resists attributing recognition to one or the other, but allows the comprehension of physical similarity and spiritual sympathy to be shared by both. The way the prose stutters after the thought that one might “complete” the other implies a romantic rhetoric of love that is abandoned, or perhaps replaced by a courtly version with all the trappings of chaste virtue. They are “closely united” in sympathy but separated by an “immense divide” of difference. In this way the natural sympathies and cultural tropes of romance are part of the “natureculture” bonding moment without discarding the “divide” that merits a respectful acknowledgement of the limitations of understanding, despite kinship. As Derek Ryan notes, the syntactical function of the semicolon supports this reading: “The use of the semi-colon too is important in signaling an openness to the boundaries between them, and the possibility that what they are ‘divided by’ is not essential and finally determined.”¹⁰⁶ Although the scene ends with Flush “on the rug at Miss Barrett’s feet,” suggesting the superiority of human over dog, Woolf gives Flush an agency in acquiescing to bind himself to human company as if it were his own individual desire motivated by mutual affection rather than a master–pet hierarchy. This complicates readings of Flush as simply an instrument of social critique. The feminist opposition to patriarchal control of education and politics in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* indicates that Woolf would not assume that another human being would so jauntily choose to be stationed below another person. Scott attempts to reconcile this potential conflict by comparing this moment in *Flush* to the narrator’s recognition in *A Room of One’s Own* “that the beadle is throwing her off the turf of Oxbridge. It repeats received order rather than achieved understanding,” an order that will ultimately be shown up as a false cultural construction when “as the book proceeds, it emerges that Flush has unique abilities, agency, and capacity to adapt.”¹⁰⁷ Ryan suggests a similar satirical purpose: “The aim of this approach is not to empty Woolf’s text of humour, but rather to ask whether the humour is not aimed at the ways in which we take our own human position too certainly – an effort, in Woolf’s words, to ‘caricature the pomposity of those who claim that they are something.’”¹⁰⁸ Yet, Woolf may also be wrestling with some of her own conflicted ideas about domestic servants, as Alison Light has suggested in *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*.¹⁰⁹ Pamela Caughie takes up this question and posits that the nonhuman character offers Woolf “a way out of the double bind of the modernist writer who would write across class lines without making her character – whether Lily Wilson or Mrs. McNab – a representative figure

of the working classes.”¹¹⁰ Yet, rather than offer a way “out” of such entanglements, the uneasy confections may only serve to point out the problematics of power in multiple kinds of labor relations since questions of domesticity and power are also part of animal studies, which illuminates the history of domestic non-human animals meant to serve our needs as pets or sources of agricultural labor. Woolf conflates problems of class and human and non-human relations in other parts of the novel too by using zooifying words for humans “herded together” and highlighting the correspondence of terms related to humans and animals in referring to human dwellings as “Rookeries” and “cells.”¹¹¹ Thus, at times, *Flush* underscores the differences between humans and other animals, particularly pets, with results that productively reveal the history of human–animal–class ensnarement, rather than negate the complexities of the bonds between them. Woolf’s novel points out how the nested hierarchies of assumed systems of power trouble our inability to develop a consistent awareness of ethical and economic codes of behavior as they relate to servants and leisure class, women and patriarchy, human and nonhuman. *Flush* heightens our prismatic sensitivity to the pluralistic and competing roles we all assume within these nested power dynamics. Combining and blending them challenges our awareness of how inequity is sometimes only recognized from one position, rather than encompassing an understanding of how one may be *both* victim and oppressor within these interlocking social systems of daily life and culture.

However, in considering how Woolf treats hierarchy and classification in *Flush*, it is important to note that the traits that distinguish the canine species are just as often described as superior to the qualities humans possess. As a result, the novel not only plays within the vertical hierarchies of these roles, but also eschews quantitative positions of “better” or “worse” by reminding us of qualitative distinctions which defy such cultural assumptions. Woolf imagines *Flush* as having an appreciation for the phenomenal world that far exceeds the poetic powers of Britain’s most renowned writers:

Here, then, the biographer must perforce come to a pause. Where two or three thousand words are sufficient for what we see . . . there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that *Flush* mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. . . . To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power.¹¹²

A similar passage bears out the pervasiveness of Woolf's insistence on Flush's superlative senses:

He knew Florence in its marmoreal smoothness and its gritty and cobbled roughness. Hoary folds of drapery, smooth fingers and feet of stone received the lick of his tongue, the quiver of his shivering snout. . . . In short, he knew Florence as no human being has ever known it; as Ruskin never knew it or George Eliot either. He knew it as only the dumb know. Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words.¹¹³

Flush's animal body allows him to experience an enthralling array of sensations. Woolf's analogy of smell to architecture, law, politics, and science is not mere hyperbole. Dogs know whether a place is safe for sleeping or whether it houses danger by its scent. Similarly, habits of interaction with other dogs – whether to play, fight, retaliate, or put a tail between the hind legs – a dog's governing codes for behavior – are bound up with cues that are particular to other canines. Even the exploratory snuffle of a canine nose performs something akin to empirical investigation.

And yet, Woolf also imagines a canine appreciation of beauty too. As Barrett-Browning records reveling in “the exquisite, almost visionary scenery of the Apennines, the wonderful variety of shape and colour,” Woolf notes that both the baby and Flush “felt none of this stimulus,”¹¹⁴ refusing to make the distinction one of merely human versus nonhuman, but instead the capacity of each body in relation to vision, whether it be the baby's near-sightedness or Flush's primary perception of scent over sight. Yet while maturity may be needed to improve the baby's appreciation of beauty, the mature Flush already possesses it, just within his own realm:

Beauty, so it seems at least, had to be crystallised into a green or violet powder and puffed down the fringed channels that lay behind his nostrils before it touched Flush's senses; and then it issued not in words, but in a silent rapture.¹¹⁵

Accurately describing the anatomy of the dog's highly developed olfactory lobe with its great interlaced or “fringed” network of over two-hundred and twenty million sensory receptors in comparison to the mere five million possessed by the human body, Woolf translates the appreciation of smell to a synesthetic painter's palate of artistic odor. There is no “superior” appreciation of beauty here, but rather different yet equally analogous modes of registering it.

Paradoxically, Woolf's analogies are rooted in a biological understanding of difference. This approach is evident in her earnest efforts to distinguish Flush's perceptions of events from how they would be ascertained through the more limited sensory capacities of her human characters. Dan Wylie, one of the critics interested in Woolf's rendering of animal consciousness, demotes these references as instances where experience "still has to be translated in human terms,"¹¹⁶ as if this constitutes a defect. Yet it is the effort of the translation that highlights the inadequacy of human language. Her assertion, "Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words"¹¹⁷ like the "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning"¹¹⁸ in "Kew Gardens," betrays the limit of language to delve into the full pungency of embodied life, whether it be human sensory experience or what she imagines is a dog's richly odiferous world. Derek Ryan, who follows the markers of different theoretical paths, investigating how "Miss Barrett's becoming-animal is not a matter of her growing a tail, nor is Flush's becoming-other a matter of walking on two legs"¹¹⁹ still arrives at a similar conclusion: "In emphasizing the inadequacies of language and suggesting that it is not a necessary component of close companion species bonding, Woolf posits the animal's apparent lack of speech as not in fact a lack at all."¹²⁰ To put this in literary terms described by Daston and Mitman, she isn't enacting anthropomorphism as much as striving for zoomorphism: "The yearning to understand what it would be like to be, say, an elephant or a cheetah scrambles the opposition between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, that is between humanizing animals and animalizing humans."¹²¹ Woolf's nephew, Quentin Bell, denotes an imaginative effort on Woolf's part that exemplifies the best kind of anthropomorphism: "*Flush* is not so much a book by a dog lover as a book by someone who would love to be a dog."¹²² Woolf only has human words, but she juxtaposes them in unexpected ways with how she might imagine culture or society and personal interaction were she in a dog's skin. In this way, the blending of fiction and biography becomes an interdisciplinary method for exploring possibilities of consciousness and subjectivity through embodied knowledge and information that touches the boundaries of what humans know. David Herman considers this hybridity of genre central to what he calls "zoonarratological"¹²³ writing: "Woolf thus uses modernist methods of narration to resituate the practice of biography in a transspecies context, revealing the extent to which life writing necessarily becomes entangled with the broader endeavor of writing life – the endeavor of documenting and engaging the nonhuman as well as human ways of encountering the world."¹²⁴ From

this perspective, the novel is therefore less about satirizing the nonhuman animal than it is about revealing the restrictive conventions upon which human communication hinges. And with those differences acknowledged, making a human attempt at imagining what might be behind that door-flap of canine subjectivity.

Remarkably, Flush's better qualities are not limited to his physical attributes of scent and touch. Woolf fictionalizes a heightened capacity for empathy on the part of Flush in comparison with her human characters. Describing Flush's attentiveness to his first owner, she writes:

Flush, as his story proves, had an even excessive appreciation of human emotions. The sight of his dear mistress snuffing the fresh air at last, letting it ruffle her hair and redden the natural freshness of her face, while the lines on her huge brow smoothed themselves out, excited him to gambols whose wildness was half sympathy with her own delight.¹²⁵

The ruffled "hair" and smoothed wrinkles are features that could be equally recognizable as an expression of canine pleasure and release, but there is no hint that either of Flush's human companions is sensitive to his manifestations of emotions. Although Ryan argues that Miss Barrett's "becoming-animal" allows her to "recognise and respond to the violence enacted against her companion species"¹²⁶ when Flush is dognapped, my reading of her reaction is quite the opposite. When Flush is stolen by fanciers who specialize in bribing wealthy pet owners, Woolf stresses Barrett's inability to appreciate what Flush might be going through. Flush's captivity is terrifying: "The room was dark. It grew steadily hotter and hotter; the smell, the heat, were unbearable; Flush's nose burnt; his coat twitched. And still Miss Barrett did not come."¹²⁷ Miss Barrett's capacity for empathy seems limited in comparison to Flush: "Miss Barrett lay on her sofa at Wimpole Street. She was vexed; she was worried, but she was not seriously alarmed. Of course Flush would suffer; he would whine and bark all night; but it was only a question of a few hours."¹²⁸ Five days of starvation and dehydration pass before a proxy (not Barrett) finally arrives to collect Flush. When he gets back home, he experiences something that resembles human shellshock as his mind throws him back to the sounds of his frightful abduction: "As he lay dazed and exhausted on the sofa at Miss Barrett's feet the howls of tethered dogs, the screams of birds in terror still sounded in his ears."¹²⁹ Barrett's disappointment at Flush's less than enthusiastic response at being released back to her shows a similar inattentiveness to the dog's own needs. Woolf's fictional narration offers another reason for Flush's inattention to her that the character of Barrett

doesn't consider – the dog's basic thirst commands his first priority upon return. In the words of Craig Smith, this shows how “the conventional human expectation of creatures who are created for our pleasure is unmasked here as a failure of human empathy.”¹³⁰ Yet the real Barrett-Browning's literary career attests to her concern for others; “The Cry of the Children” is devoted to exposing the cruelty of child labor practices and rails against the horrors she empathetically imagines they experience. Further, as Barrett-Browning's letters indicate and Woolf dramatizes, she defied not only her father, but also Robert Browning in deciding to meet the thieves' demands and pay the ransom for Flush's life. Woolf sympathized with the personal challenges that Barrett-Browning faced,¹³¹ so it is doubtful that she would intend to malign her personally. Instead, by using such a well-intentioned human subject, the inability to fully extend empathetic reasoning to the motivations and intentions of nonhuman animals in this crucial moment of need seems less attached to Barrett-Browning as an individual, and more indicative of a shortcoming of humans in general.

However, these human and nonhuman dynamics, while not merely extended metaphors for relationships between humans, do bear on similar patterns that are embedded in the infrastructure of human relations. The class structure of society and the superficial assumptions of cultural bias are factors that play a prominent part in the novel's critique not only of how humans treat nonhuman animals, but also of how they regard other humans. Flush, who is both a dog and an aristocrat due to his breeding, participates in social stratification:

Dogs therefore, Flush began to suspect, differ; some are high, others low; and his suspicions were confirmed by snatches of talk held in passing with the dogs of Wimpole Street. ‘See that scallywag? A mere mongrel! . . . By gad, that's a fine Spaniel. One of the best blood in Britain!’¹³²

This passage enacts a hierarchy that is culturally conditioned rather than biologically determined. Anna Snaith comments, “By attributing the ‘bestial’ view of Whitechapel to an aristocratic *dog*, Woolf exposes the ridiculousness of the hierarchies.”¹³³ Revealingly, the clues Flush uses to assess how status is ascertained – “Some take their airings in carriages and drink from purple jars”¹³⁴ – are the same kind of shallow monikers that stuff the society columns. Although I disagree with Jutta Ittner's assessment that Flush has “no agency of his own” and “all the different layers of this anthropomorphic construct are human,”¹³⁵ her attention to the way in which Flush's oppression is a particularized critique of

Victorian society is keen: “Miss Barrett’s efforts to ‘refine and educate [the puppy’s] powers’ comments on a society that tried to turn little ‘savages’ into obedient citizens. Like a young child, the eager puppy measures himself against the idealized parent, yet even the most talented animal will never make the grade.”¹³⁶ Woolf does seem to aim her satirical bite on the rigid gender, class, and race constructs of Victorian society. Even Elizabeth Barrett, who in some ways lives an upper-class life of ease in comparison to those living just a few streets away and thus is in a position of power and privilege in regards to class, is still herself a victim of oppression in other measurements of Victorian paternalism and gendered expectation: “Elizabeth’s life may not look problematic, living as she does in a rich house on Wimpole Street, yet she is in actuality stifled in the dark.”¹³⁷ In other passages Woolf likens her confinement to that of a pet on a leash or a caged animal: “She could not go out. She was chained to the sofa. ‘A bird in a cage would have as good a story,’ she wrote, as she had.”¹³⁸ Woolf also draws a comparison between farm animals and humans forced to live in squalor: “Yet how could one describe politely a bedroom in which two or three families lived above a cow-shed, when the cow-shed had no ventilation, when cows were milked and killed and eaten under the bedroom?”¹³⁹ The problem of human indifference toward both other humans and animals of other species is criticized. The degradation of humans has historically been reinforced through comparison to nonhuman animals:

Arguments for human specialness have regularly been utilized by human groups to justify the exploitation not just of other organisms, but of other *humans* as well (other nations, other races, or simply the ‘other’ sex); armed with such arguments, one had only to demonstrate that these others were not *fully* human, or were ‘closer to the animals’ in order to establish one’s right of dominion.¹⁴⁰

Making these parallels in the context of a novel about a dog, however, has the effect of deriding, rather than reinforcing, assumptions of superiority. If the reader can readily appreciate how Flush is harmed by Barrett-Browning’s erroneous presuppositions about his life, the deliberate silencing of the suffering of humans who can communicate through shared language becomes shamefully acute. *Flush* discerns the ways in which the upper class is often mistaken in their assumptions about their servants. In a note to the text, Woolf quotes one of Barrett-Browning’s letters praising the bravery and boldness of her maid, Wilson, in coming with her to Italy in defiance of her father. Woolf surmises that Wilson may have had little choice but to follow her employer:

It is worth, parenthetically, dwelling for a second on the extreme precariousness of a servant's life. If Wilson had not gone with Miss Barrett, she would have been, as Miss Barrett knew, 'turned into the street before sunset,' with only a few shillings, presumably, saved from her sixteen pounds a year. And what then would have been her fate?¹⁴¹

Snaith astutely points out that the class dynamics have implications for Woolf as well: "[Woolf] has the power to bring lives up from the basement: to make lives for Flush and Wilson."¹⁴² Although Woolf conscientiously draws attention to Wilson's plight, and remonstrates that "The life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure and thus cries out for the services of a biographer,"¹⁴³ Woolf seems to beg the question of why she chose to write this biography about Flush instead of Wilson.

One possible rejoinder is that the nonhuman focus allows for a more persuasive assessment of discrimination as a cultural construction. Both Flush and Barrett-Browning thrive in the more democratic atmosphere of Italy. In Florence, "Flush faced the curious and at first upsetting truth that the laws of the Kennel Club are not universal. . . . He had revised his code accordingly. . . . He was the friend of all the world now. All dogs were his brothers."¹⁴⁴ Flush's previous illusion regarding the fixed status of particular breeds is shattered – such hierarchies among and between species are not innate, they are the creation of a particularly English sense of social propriety. Haraway underscores the significance of the kennel pure-breed within human market systems:

The state, private corporations, research institutions, and clubs all played their roles in moving practices for controlling animal reproduction from pockets of memory and local endeavors of both elites and working people to rationalized national and international markets tied to registries. The breeding system that evolved with the data-keeping system was called scientific breeding, and in myriad ways this paper-plus-flesh system is behind the histories of eugenics and genetics, as well as other sciences (and politics) of animal and human reproduction.¹⁴⁵

The ways in which interactions between humans and nonhumans have both been shaped by human cultural systems and have been used to justify the suppression of humans within the system as well are inextricably bound; Woolf's text, while playful, still represents the traces of these shared narratives.

Not only are dogs liberated from the strictures of breeding class in Italy, but Flush also shows signs of enjoying personal freedoms in relation to humans: "He had no need of a chain in this new world; he had no need of protection. If Mr. Browning was late in going for his walk – he and Flush

were the best of friends now – Flush boldly summoned him.”¹⁴⁶ All hierarchies, including the gulf between humans and “lower” animals, have been turned on their heads as Flush now “summon[s]” the human. These are the same attributes of a more fully inflected reciprocal relationship between humans and domesticated animals as described by Vicki Hearne as she envisions mutual calling and teaching within the pet–owner relationship. The effect of the shared trajectory of Barrett-Browning’s liberation and Flush’s independence is simultaneously to model a better form of mutual respect and companionability between species and to pose a challenge to the entrenched conviction that humans, particularly the British ruling class, are automatically entitled to priority over any economically stratified, racialized, or nationalized “other,” human or nonhuman. Yet, as Haraway reminds us, this correspondence should not be mistaken for equivalency: “I resist the tendency to condemn all relations of instrumentality between animals and people as necessarily involving objectification and oppression of a kind similar to the objectifications and oppressions of sexism, colonialism, and racism.”¹⁴⁷ As she defends the productivity of certain kinds of systems and instrumentalities that construct human and nonhuman relations, she also implies that inequalities between humans demand a more wholesale condemnation of any oppressive prejudices. Yet, while it would be egregious to reduce all oppression to direct equivalency, the nodes of correlation between different ways mastery and oppression are enacted on humans, nonhumans, and landscapes is relevant to deepening our understanding of the complexity of these cultural practices and their impacts: “Sustainability is a mutual enterprise that pertains as much to human social well-being as to the health of the physical world. If they are at odds, it is only because of our failure to consider their interdependencies.”¹⁴⁸ The shared aspects of all forms of oppression are significant to understanding the cultural biases and assumptions that underlie overlapping systems of control. As Scott even-handedly notes, both problematic animal representations and more posthuman moments of “think[ing] like a tree, thus crossing over green margins of the species barrier”¹⁴⁹ exist in Woolf’s biographical experience with and literary treatment of different types of animals, including hens, horses, pets, and fish, insects, and birds. Modernism’s experimentation with ways of representing interior subjectivity, here exemplified in Woolf’s fiction, complete with the messiness of its divergences within and between both human and nonhuman characters as they move within and around the same physical world – sometimes in shared commonality of feeling and perception, and other times in misunderstanding and isolation – offer a

new form of manifesting the empathies and antagonisms that permeate the more-than-human world, whether it be in potent silences, shared glances, or the twittering sounds of intermingled human and nonhuman vocalization.

In Woolf's work it is not just the humans who get to analyze and claim dominion over the environment; nonhuman forces are equally capable of examining and hypothesizing about the human animal. The suggestive commonalities Woolf establishes between humans and nonhuman nature is often foundational to her political critique of empire. In "Thunder at Wembley" Woolf's subject is the dynamic interaction between humans, animals, and weather during the spring Exhibition of Empire in London, which she and Leonard toured in May 1924. The exhibition was a miniature version of the British empire that constructed a fiction of its own stewardship and benevolent interest in foreign territories, exemplifying DeLoughrey and Handley's observation that in many colonial representations, "naturalized others were likened to a construction of nature that was increasingly seen to require masculine European management."¹⁵⁰ Specifically, as Scott Cohen's research describes, the Exhibit of 1924 featured:

A map of the world that could be strolled in a well-planned afternoon or over several days, as the official guide recommended. Every territory that could afford to build a pavilion had one at the exhibition. Along with the Palaces of Industry, Engineering, and Science, the largest structures were reserved for pavilions representing India, Canada, and Australia, each occupying about five acres. Wembley allowed visitors to inspect their empire, either while strolling the fifteen miles of roads named by Rudyard Kipling or riding in one of eighty-eight carriages circling the park on the Never-Stop Railway.¹⁵¹

Insidiously evocative of current amusement parks, the deliberate entertainment and story-telling function is evident in employing a famous adventure novelist and defender of the empire to name the exhibit's roads.

In contrast, Woolf is interested in narrating what *isn't* in the exhibit. Her story highlights England's solipsistic exclusion of all that doesn't programmatically reflect its unquestioned control. From the outset of "Thunder at Wembley," anything associated with nature is at odds with authority: "It is nature that is the ruin of Wembley; yet it is difficult to see what steps Lord Stevenson, Lieutenant-General Travers Clarke, and the Duke of Devonshire could have taken to keep her out."¹⁵² Woolf satirically muses that "they might have eradicated the grass and felled the chestnut trees."¹⁵³ The verbs "eradicate" and "fell" suggest the violent action of war

and overthrow, a prerequisite for the imperial control the exhibit is designed to exalt. DeLoughrey and Handley suggest the significance of subverting the rhetoric of colonial power by noting that “the self-conscious process of renaming and revisioning is a subversion of the colonial language of taxonomy, discipline and control.”¹⁵⁴ Here, Woolf uses wild nature – moving freely within and across the exhibition as an agent of disruption – to recontextualize the assumptions of British superiority based on human notions of labeling and demarcation. Likewise, ecophenomenology and ecomaterialism rebuff the traditional view of human hierarchy; instead of being apart from or above other animals, humans are, as David Abram succinctly describes, “in the midst of, rather than on top of this order,”¹⁵⁵ a realization that must, as Serpil Oppermann puts it, “dehierarchize our conceptual categories that structure dualisms to reconfigure our social, cultural, and political practices.”¹⁵⁶ While humans are in the process of observing and passing judgment on the life around them – as the British citizens are doing at the Exhibition of Empire – other animals are also scrutinizing human behavior. Consequently, the human species becomes the animal to be examined.

A crucial question about the British citizens in “The Thunder at Wembley” is posed by a bird: “And what, one asks, is the spell it lays upon them? How, with all this dignity of their own, can they bring themselves to believe in that?”¹⁵⁷ The bird is the agent questioning how these people could believe in “that,” the supposed glories of imperial conquest. Woolf writes, “But this cynical reflection, at once so chill and superior, was made, of course, by the thrush.”¹⁵⁸ Woolf endows the thrush with sentience and an ability to critique the human species. The choice of the thrush, in particular, has both literary and ecological relevance. As Hubert Zapf has pointed out, “birds especially are frequent dialogic others of poets and incarnate the transformative power of poetic discourse” as Woolf would know Keats so famously did in “Ode to a Nightingale.” But the thrush also has a more particular ecological resonance as well. *Birds In London*, a book the Woolfs owned that was published the year Woolf was writing “Thunder at Wembley,” details the precarious survival of the thrush as a result of human activity in the parks and the importation of exotic plants: “Of all these vanishing species the thrush is most to be regretted, on account of its beautiful, varied, and powerful voice. . . . In these vast gardens and parks . . . there should be ample room for many scores of the delightful songsters that are now vanishing or have already vanished” due in part to planting “so many unsuitable exotic shrubs.”¹⁵⁹ While Christina Alt does not mention this work specifically, she

documents that its author, W.H. Hudson, was an influence on Woolf's depiction of the natural world: "Hudson's intermingling of the roles of ethnologist and novelist suggested to Woolf the way in which the study of nature might serve as an analogy for the representation of life in fiction."¹⁶⁰ His influence here might have been more literal; the fact that this species is at risk due in part to the British importation of foreign plants – an act of power and domination that was done without full understanding of the wider ecological relationships involved and potentially motivated by a desire to use the "exotic shrubs" as objects displaying the reach of the British empire – makes the thrush a particularly appropriate commentator on the threat of the British colonial mindset to all its enterprises in controlling and placing plants and animals, both human and nonhuman. Furthermore, the "superior" thrush disrupts the chain of human hierarchy by articulating an insight that most people have not yet recognized about themselves. As Cohen notes, the people at the exhibit are both "readers" of the exhibit's tale of conquest, but they are also "characters"¹⁶¹ manipulated by its carefully constructed layout as they walk through and play the role of gawking tourist. The titled authorities may think they can encapsulate the world in an exhibit based on English supremacy, but nature and the nonhuman can't be kept out. Other animals are equally, if not more perceptively, cognizant of the human specimens on display.

Woolf's empathy for the nonhuman perspective both reveals a resonant more-than-human world, and emphatically stresses the folly of humanity's exalted notions of its own importance. For Woolf, being in conversation with nonhuman creatures acknowledges collective community and expands literary representations of daily life. As Abram explains, "Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence."¹⁶² Woolf's ability to make visible what often goes unseen and unspoken in the surrounding environment distinguishes her attempts to render a meaningful experience of human life.

The meaning of a more-than-human life in *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is traditionally understood as an elegiac commentary on the apocalyptic crisis of the First World War. An ecocritical reading of the novel shifts this tonal emphasis, acknowledging the dark impulses of death, but revealing the ever-present tension of isolation and community posed by the invigorating potential of embodied interaction

with the encompassing environment. Embodied encounters with the natural world spur her characters' thoughts about their place in the larger world and reveal the unconscious bonds that sustain them. Indeed, Woolf's depiction of embodied life in a shared organic world generates the novel's ultimate affirmation, the creation of Lily Briscoe's art. The culmination of Lily's painting depends on an embodied participation in the "dictates" of the environmental forces that surround her. Throughout the novel, Nonhuman creatures and nature are depicted as having distinct lives, not necessarily invested in human concerns, and yet they participate in and respond to the same events and stimuli. *To the Lighthouse* rejects a romantic "oneness" – a belief that nature exists to serve humans or mirror their emotions – in favor of this kind of intertwining. An ecophenomenological reading of *To the Lighthouse* complicates conventional readings of the novel that treat nature as primarily antagonistic to humanity, or as an agent of apocalyptic destruction; instead environmental presences in the novel also compete with these registers to suggest the creativity and rejuvenation that come from acknowledging humans as creatures embedded in a more-than-human world.

Critical appraisals of the "Time Passes" section of the novel – which informs the reader of the death of primary characters by means of bracketed asides while the organic changes taking place in the neglected seaside home constitute the main action – commonly assume that despair and ruin are the primary themes. Christine Froula's analysis claims that "Time Passes" "evokes a world emptied of life," "a world lapsed out of meaning," and "foreshadows death's oblivion"¹⁶³ and that only the human presence of the narrator and Mrs. McNab can "make stay against destruction and beckon the seeker back to a life that is enough, an art that arrests nature's flux."¹⁶⁴ An ecocritical reading adds another interpretive layer to these readings, suggesting that the imagined destruction of the Ramsay home, had it not been rescued by Mrs. McNab, offers several images that can be seen as comforting or beautiful and that rather than human art arresting nature's flux, nature's flux is sometimes crucial to the very formation of the human creative act. Froula acknowledges that Woolf and Lily's art reveres the natural world and seeks to record the mystery of its everyday significance, but assumes artistic creativity is ultimately separate from and oppositional to the rhythms of nature: "rather than copy nature, abstraction strives to evoke the (imperceptible, unrepresentable) 'thing itself' as it exists beyond the organic world of time, death, and decay."¹⁶⁵ Similarly, Julia Briggs declares, "'Time Passes' is a rhapsody upon time, death and endings."¹⁶⁶ Though death, emptiness, and a grief

over human mortality are certainly important aspects of the novel, ecocritical attention to Woolf's efforts to depict the nonhuman world in this section of the novel suggests that those impulses are simultaneously infused with the potential for nonhuman life to provide alternate conceptions of continuity and joy. Although Louise Westling writes primarily on *Between the Acts* in "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," she offers a provocative contrasting analysis of "Time Passes" by pinpointing the source of "tragedy" as emanating from a realization that "centuries of humanist assumptions are overturned."¹⁶⁷ This revelation may be startling for readers, but it is ultimately productive for ushering in a new appreciation of other diverse forms of life. I contend that Woolf's vision of human experience depends on a dialectic that has despair and loss as one pole, but unity and hope as the other. The positive register requires readers to embrace an embodied life that presumes humans have value not only for their individual accomplishments deemed important by human society, but also as part of a larger community of daily miracles, fluctuation, change, and continuation. Laura Doyle has helpfully pointed the way toward acknowledging the importance of embodiment in *To the Lighthouse* arguing, "Woolf corporealizes the spaces rendered empty by patriarchal culture and thought" and "situates the mother strategically at the center of this power-inflected intercorporeality."¹⁶⁸ However, Doyle's emphasis on the tension between patriarchal philosophy and maternal phenomenology in the novel is too constrictive. First, it obscures how Lily Briscoe revises Mrs. Ramsay's perspective by unifying light and dark, a detail that suggests that the mother is not the most important figure in the text. Second, it neglects Mr. Bankes' capacity for embodied appreciation, a trait that resists gendering phenomenal awareness. My reading builds on Doyle's recognition of embodiment in the novel, but extends beyond her interest in gender codes to suggest ecophenomenology's significance for understanding the novel's larger theme of embracing the potential of change and uncertainty as a source of creativity and renewal.

Although Woolf's interest in eulogizing her own family lends biographical credence to the novel's darker impulses,¹⁶⁹ biography also hints at a balance between loss and rejuvenation. Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West was ongoing while she was writing *To the Lighthouse*. Sackville-West's *Country Notes* (1939) express a belief in renewal that correlates with Woolf's representations of nature's persistency:

I suppose the pleasure of the country life lies really in the eternally renewed evidences of the determination to live. That is a truism when said, but anything but a truism when daily observed . . . The small green shoot

appearing one day at the base of a plant one had feared dead, brings a comfort and an encouragement for which the previous daily observance is responsible. The life principle has proved unconquerable, then, in spite of frost and winds? The powers of resistance against adversity are greater than we thought; the germ of life lies hidden even in the midst of apparent death. A cynic might contend that nothing depressed him more than this resoluteness to keep going; it depends on the angle from which you regard this gallant tenacity. . . . If you have a taste for such things, no amount of repetition can stale them; they stand for permanence in a changing world.¹⁷⁰

Sackville-West's "angle" on the world offers a perspective that recasts "permanence" as the promise of perpetual change – the months of noting the absence of the "small green shoot" are necessary for creating the ensuing feelings of "comfort" and "encouragement" when it breaks the ground again. The "tenacity" Sackville-West's essay affirms in these natural cycles of the "life . . . hidden in the midst of apparent death" resemble the "thistle thrust[ing] itself between the tiles of larder" in "Time Passes."

Woolf's own memories on the anniversary of her mother's death are capped by an immersion in an embodied consideration of nature's capacity for stimulating something new. A diary entry from May 5, 1924, the 29th anniversary of Julia Stephen's death, describes Woolf's recollection of herself as a thirteen-year-old girl in the presence of her mother's dead body, laughing uncomfortably behind her hand as the nurses sobbed. The entry transitions from this memory to a contemplation of life and nature:

But enough of death – it is life that matters. We came back from Rodmell 7 days ago, after a royal Easter which Nelly survived heroically. After weeding I had to go in out of the sun; and how the quiet lapped me round! and then how dull I got, to be quite just: and how the beauty brimmed over me and steeped my nerves till they quivered, as I have seen a water plant quiver when the water overflowed it. (This is not right, but I must one day express that sensation).¹⁷¹

The movement from a consideration of death to writing about a quietness that bursts unexpectedly into beauty that "steeped [her] nerves till they quivered" like a plant receiving water expresses a tight oscillation between the impulses of loss and life. The "life that matters" still comes through. The way it makes itself known comes from a submersion into stillness, a giving over to the atmosphere of solitude around her that rewards her patience with inspiration. In terms of Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology, one might say that Woolf "obtains [from embodied reverie] not an *answer* but a confirmation of its astonishment."¹⁷² The fact that she can't

find the right words to express the experience attests to the difficulty of capturing embodied revelation in prose, yet doesn't negate the sensation of being subsequently renewed by the unexpected encounter.

Similar instances of embodied revelation comprise many pivotal moments of silent communication in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily acts "with all her senses quickened as they were,"¹⁷³ and "Mr. Bankes was alive to things which would not have struck him had not those sandhills revealed to him the body of his friendship" with Mr. Ramsay.¹⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty explains that consciousness is always filtered through our physical experience of being bodies in the world: "As for consciousness, it has to be conceived, no longer as a constituting consciousness and, as it were, a pure being-for-itself, but as a *perceptual* consciousness, as the subject pattern of behavior, as being-in-the-world or existence."¹⁷⁵ The inner consciousness isn't solipsistic or enclosed, but exists in relationship with the physical environment. Or, as Karan Barad puts it, "[w]e do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because 'we' are of the world."¹⁷⁶ Woolf composes long passages to put these links between world and mind into words, as in this scene describing Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes' shared experience of the seaside:

They came there regularly every evening as if drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated out and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief. First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness on the ruffled waves. Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of pure water . . . They both felt a common hilarity excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailboat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails drop down; and then, with a natural impulse to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness – because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest.¹⁷⁷

This passage explicitly engages the minds of Lily and Mr. Bankes, who are "drawn" to the vibrant scene through their perceiving bodies. Looking and feeling together in simultaneous rhythms with the landscape, their shared thoughts are set in motion in accordance with the movement of the ships on the water. The blueness of the sky "expands" the "heart" yet in the next

instant the cold sea-salted air “checks” and “chills” the body. The description is unique, as Abram reminds us, “Even today, we rarely acknowledge the local presence of the atmosphere as it swirls between two persons” but instead relegate it to “empty space.”¹⁷⁸ Woolf insists on the fingering “airs” both here and in “Time Passes” as well as their ability to “expand,” lift and carry, or “check,” disturb and disintegrate. These varying responses to divergent environmental prompts are also seen when the characters react with “hilarity” to the thrill of erratic bursts of water and then experience feelings of sadness produced by gazing toward the dunes. The view of the dunes isn’t necessarily at odds with the “merriment” of the sea scene. Instead, it is “a natural impulse to complete the picture” that prompts the viewers to look toward the distant dunes. This swaying of perspectives will recur when Mr. Ramsey, James, and Cam sail to the lighthouse in the third section of the novel, causing Lily to muse upon the effects of distance and individual perspective. Both of these poles are necessary for a “complete” understanding of place and people.

As with Woolf’s diary entry, the sensations produced in Lily and Mr. Banks don’t lead to a resolution as much as they provoke wonder. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, this kind of embodied participation in viewing the natural world and appreciating its palpable presence suggests the potential of the environment to exist in and for itself, beyond human control, even as it is perceived through the human body:

As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it in some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. But, it may be retorted, the sky is not mind and there is surely no sense in saying that it exists for itself. It is indeed true that the geographer’s or the astronomer’s sky does not exist for itself. But of the sky, as it is perceived or sensed, subtended by my gaze which ranges over and resides in it, and providing as it does the theatre of a certain living pulsation adopted by my body, it can be said that it exists for itself.¹⁷⁹

The fact that the sky, or the view, acts upon the human attests to the agency of the nonhuman world. The reaction is registered both physically through the “living pulsation adopted by my body” and mentally as the sky “thinks itself within me” and “saturates” human thought. Eco-materialists Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann similarly describe the experience of color as a complex nexus of body and physics – “Resulting

from the coevolution of organism and light, the eye is a biological prism. Like in all things biological, this interaction is organized differently in all living species. We humans see a spectrum that dogs perceive less vividly, and bees see colors that we humans can only imagine¹⁸⁰ – as contact surfaces of light and reception remind us that our understanding is always only a partial register of a constantly present world of matter and material. This same nonhuman agency and intertwined body–mind response characterizes Woolf’s depictions of human characters reacting to their environment.

The way impulses and moods ripple across the water, land, and Lily and Mr. Banks are suggestive of a shared consciousness not stimulated by any one being, but cocreated. Wendy Wheeler explains, “We learn that ‘mind’ cannot be understood simply as mental events going on inside individual heads; it is, powerfully and *really*, in our bodies, in the world, and in other people. Subjectivity is intersubjectivity.”¹⁸¹ Woolf composes such rhythms of intersubjectivity throughout her fiction, such as *Between the Acts* where Woolf directs the reader to “Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued syllabing, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still,”¹⁸² or in “The Death of the Moth” where “The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane.”¹⁸³ Indeed, one might even stitch these moments of intersubjectivity to intertextuality as the leaves’ “many tongued syllabing” recalls how Mrs. Ramsay intuits the lyrics, “And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are fully of trees and changing leaves” as arising from some logos of the world mingling with the song: “The words (she was looking out the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves,” perhaps not recognizing, as Lily will when she completes her painting, that the dictates are emanating from the impulses of the organic environment, which are not “cut off” or “no one,” just as the atmosphere between Lily and Mr. Banks is not “empty.” Additionally, the significance of the moth’s participation in the impulses to movement and stillness in the swells of energy that roll from the plough and the animals outside, suggest the frame for the lives that beat against invisible thresholds that may open upon understanding in “The Window” section of *To the Lighthouse*.

Repeatedly, Woolf's representations invest the environment with its own agency, a sentient power that human characters only occasionally sense in their own "moments of being" – the reverberations made manifest in art, song, and language, when humans take the time to look, listen and let the sky "think itself within me."

Part of humanity's experience in a world not fully regulated by human control is the pull between alternating surges of loss and joy. The novel's phenomenal aspects create the positive tensions that many critics overlook. Mrs. Ramsay's response to the pulsing beams of the lighthouse illuminates the novel's revolving emotions of loss and discovery. Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay's embodied perception – based on "sound" and "sight" – of the lighthouse and the sea:

Always, Mrs. Ramsay felt, one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight. She listened but it was all very still; cricket was over; the children were in their baths; there was only the sound of the sea. She stopped knitting; she held the long reddish-brown stocking dangling in her hands a moment. She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all one's relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly . . . It is enough! It is enough!¹⁸⁴

Once again, stillness and attentiveness precede revelation. Mrs. Ramsay questions, an "interrogation," but receives differing impulses or "answers," the result of "when one woke" or the state of becoming conscious of surrounding stimuli in a new way. She identifies with the light, but also distances herself from it, acknowledging that it is still somehow different from her. The light alternatively inspires reflections of that which is "pitiless" or "remorseless" and that which gives, through a direct physical interaction of "stroking" the brain, an intense "delight." As Laura Doyle notes, the image is infused with female sexual innuendo,¹⁸⁵ a point which, I argue, also emphasizes the intimacy of the human and nonhuman interaction. Further this physical and "phenomenological interaction with the expanse of that which is beyond the human" can prompt "inquisitive openness to new pleasures."¹⁸⁶ Patricia Morgne Cramer reminds readers that Woolf's use of lesbian imagery derives from her appreciation of earlier

romantic conventions: "Like Plato, Dante, and other authors of idealist love traditions, Woolf aims to reshape the collective (female) erotic imagination, not to retell or even reinvent lesbian-love plots about couples"¹⁸⁷ One of the ways Woolf reframes collective lesbian desire is through imagining alternative modes of erotic encounter with nature. As Derek Ryan also surmises, "Where the sexual politics of Woolf's novels are concerned, then, the lines of becoming shared between human and non-human are crucial."¹⁸⁸ Mrs. Ramsay's surrender to the stimulus presented by her surroundings – the crickets, the sea, the light across the floor – stirs new impulses of desire and satisfaction.

This understanding of the world as an agent that interacts with humans on an embodied level, rather than something inanimate that humans control, expresses the divergence between the other characters' experiences of reality and Mr. Ramsay's adherence to a philosophical reduction of reality. Mr. Ramsay's quest to get from "Q" to "R" in the scheme of human achievement represents a methodological hierarchy that can be teleologically comprehended as a predictable progression. It assumes that knowledge exists on a mental plane manipulated by human thought and detached from embodied experience. The epitome of this detachment is expressed in Andrew Ramsey's efforts to explain his father's philosophy to Lily by giving her the following directive: "Think of a kitchen table . . . when you're not there."¹⁸⁹ The ridiculousness of this kind of philosophy is exposed when Lily imagines the table: "with a painful effort of concentration, she focused her mind, not upon the silver-bossed bark of the tree, or upon its fish-shaped leaves, but upon a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in air."¹⁹⁰ The upside-down table is a bit farcical, or as Westling writes, "thoroughly satiric."¹⁹¹ Its position is completely at odds with the function of a table. Lily's thoughts gravitate toward the kinds of details that make the table a physical entity – it is "scrubbed," "grained and knotted," and possesses a structural "integrity." While it is unclear exactly what Andrew's instructions were meant to make Lily comprehend, Lily tries to place the table in the material world. By seeing it in a tree, she implicitly associates the table with its natural source – not the human mind, but the organic life of the tree's living wood. Lily interprets the kitchen table as a new materialist might "in which all life forms and matter exhibit a kind of incipient self-articulation that communicate via internal relations."¹⁹² As Lily comprehends it, the image of the table still expresses its origins and the process by which it was metamorphosed into a structure that humans use

to chop, recombine, and prepare to feast on other, edible, matter. Mr. Ramsey imagines the tree as an implement of thought, while Lily, thinking through the perspective of the wood, sees written in the grains and knots, the thing “entire.” While at least one critic has used Woolf’s skeptical view of philosophy to argue that any application of a philosophical theory to her work is deleterious,¹⁹³ Merleau-Ponty’s embodied philosophy is also at odds with the kind of philosophy that Woolf mocks in *To the Lighthouse*. Abram explains how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy relies on an engagement with the world rather than a detachment from it:

By disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of ‘what is’ requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow *outside* of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand.¹⁹⁴

Embodied phenomenology, in fact, affirms the values inherent in Woolf’s retort. The “complete picture of reality” that ecophenomenology rebuffs coincides with the image of an alphabet, discrete units that can be known from beginning to end, or A to Z. Both Merleau-Ponty and Woolf reject totalizing theories. The mind can’t be severed from reality or understood by visualizing an object without any relation to the human perceiver. Instead, Merleau-Ponty and Woolf advance an understanding of humans “within” the world – a coexistence that “rejuvenat[es] our sense of wonder” at that which remains undefinable and dynamically evasive.

Communal awareness and interconnectivity are key themes in one of the novel’s most memorable scenes, the dinner party. Ecophenomenological awareness of the atmosphere creates an undercurrent of unity in these passages – bodies sharing the same space participate in a positive moment of connection between individuals. Initially, everyone is separate and feels acutely isolated: “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate”;¹⁹⁵ “Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking.”¹⁹⁶ Mrs. Ramsay feels a responsibility to draw these individuals together, and so “giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins

ticking – one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper.¹⁹⁷ Here Woolf's prose also participates in the merging by fusing together a myriad of symbols. She combines the watch (a potential patriarchal object of measured control in the form of Paul Rayley's pocket-watch that Mrs. Ramsay admires), a symbol of individual human lives passing, with the three pulses of the lighthouse. The lighthouse, in turn, is also associated with the feeble flame of protection that Mrs. Ramsay has felt as a fleeting joy that makes the effort of life worthwhile. However, the flame also alludes to the lighting of the centerpiece candles, which inaugurate an atmosphere of unity:

Now all the candles were lit up and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island, had their common cause against that fluidity out there.¹⁹⁸

The atmosphere of the room is changed by the flames waving against the black windowpanes. Now there is a unity among the individuals at the table, forming a kind of protective center, but the word "island" also recalls the unity of Britain itself. This is the kind of stability that Mrs. Ramsay wishes to keep, the promise of a center of light that doesn't disappear and reappear in rhythmic beats, but rather emanates, through the power of human effort, light without end. The room itself is described as the lamp of the lighthouse: the candles are the source of focusing light "compos [ing]" the party and shining out through panes of glass that "rippled," creating "a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily." Thus, the dinner scene is transformed into one of the novel's visions of the lighthouse. However, this vision of solidarity will be challenged by the proliferation of other perspectives on the lighthouse and its significance. Transitoriness is fundamental to the dinner party – perishable food is consumed, candles burn down, everyone will finally rise and depart. Yet these diminishments are part of what gives the meal its poignancy and value.

The presence of a variety of points of view on the same object is also a unifying feature of the scene, as we will see at the end of the novel with

multiple perspectives on the lighthouse itself. The glow of the candles illumines another artistic bringing together, Rose's fruit arrangement, making shadows and hollows of color on the table "like a world in which one could take one's staff and climb hills [Mrs. Ramsay] thought."¹⁹⁹ She notices Augustus Carmichael looking too, but "plunging in" and "breaking off a tassel there," which was "his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them."²⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty elucidates the alchemy of such unity: "Private worlds communicate" because each is "a variant of one common world."²⁰¹ It is only through our shared experience in the same phenomenal world that we can begin to identify truths that can be shared by all: "It is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds . . . which connects our perspectives, permits transition from one to the other."²⁰² The shared experience of eating the food, being encompassed in the light emanating from the center of the table, and gazing upon the creations placed on it, are part of the atmosphere that allows for the "private worlds" of each individual to "communicate."

Between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" sections of the novel, Woolf inserts "Time Passes," a narration of the changes that occur to the summer home during ten years of the family's absence, including the timespan of the First World War. Yet even the presence of war is alluded to in the first section of the novel. While Mrs. Ramsay is reading to her son James, she hears:

Suddenly a loud cry, as of a sleep-walker, half-roused, something about
Stormed at with shot and shell
Sung out with the utmost intensity in her ear, made her turn
apprehensively.²⁰³

The line "Stormed at with shot and shell" creates a break in the prose, appearing off by itself, as if a bomb has ripped through the paragraph. It anticipates visually the shelling that will kill one of the Ramsays' sons during the war: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]."²⁰⁴ Like the offset type above, the brackets segregate this section of text, encapsulating the sentences in a way that both treats them as an insignificant aside and also emphasizes the suddenness of disaster – the explosive revelations are packed into the casing of the brackets. "Stormed at with shot and shell" is a line from a Tennyson poem that Mr. Ramsay is reciting, "Charge of the Light Brigade." So this evocation of a Victorian colonial military disaster ironically presages the carnage of the First World War. These textual repetitions create an

ecophenomenological sense that humans are already synchronized with a larger repeating rhythm of the world:

Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalization such as we experience in that quasi-stupor to which we are reduced when we try to live at the level of sensation . . . Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain aspects and synchronized with them.²⁰⁵

Mrs. Ramsay's apprehension at hearing her husband's unexplained shout of interruption is not only a reaction to the moment, but also an instinct of fear that goes beyond herself in the present moment and carries with it an awareness of some impending potential harm. The reference to "a loud cry, as of a sleep-walker, half-roused" also foreshadows Mr. Ramsay's grief at the death of his wife, another event revealed in "Time Passes": "[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]"²⁰⁶ Mr. Ramsay's shout, heard by Mrs. Ramsay through the window, is out of context and unexplained, exemplifying not only the modernist style of fragmented prose, but disrupting the narrative, as the war will tear into a generation of lives, leaving them without the context of satisfying explanations or meanings. The awkward, disjointed sentence describing Mr. Ramsay's arms with tripping dependent clauses thrust in at odd intervals replicates the sensation of his stumbling, confused, sleep-walking grief. The sleep-walking state of mind further creates a sensation of anonymity, an anonymity repeated in the phrase "twenty or thirty young men . . . among" which was Andrew. The chilling vagueness as to the exact number of lives lost, and the obscurity of Andrew within this group suggests a collective grief, not exclusive just to these individuals, or this family, but a wider, anonymous sharing in the experience of death and war. Sounded in a summer day years before the war would actually happen, these experiences would eventually be repeated again in a second world war, and in other deaths yet to come. Stimulated by an awareness beyond her own individual understanding, Lily too will act from the same instincts; this synchronicity with the world doesn't only register doom or peril, but also inspiration, continuation, and hope.

By sinking these revelations about her characters into a section devoted primarily to nonhuman life, Woolf shifts the focus of experience to a larger host of sentient beings living within the spectrum of human politics and

history. In this sense, decay and transformation don't perpetuate despair as much as they offer alternatives for life different from usual human expectations. Westling's reading of the "empty" barn in *Between the Acts* is instructive. The barn empty of human characters is still full of scuttling animal life, suggesting "the proper context for rethinking human destiny: a giddy tangle of forms and beings within each kind dances its own rhythm, irrepressibly intertwined."²⁰⁷ Similarly, in "Time Passes" the suffusion of moist green decay and animal life invades the Ramsay home:

A thistle thrust itself between the tiles of the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind wainscots. Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the window-pane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass; giant artichokes towered among roses; a fringed carnation flowered among the cabbages; while the gentle tapping of a weed at the window had become, on winters' nights, a drumming from sturdy trees and thorned briars which made the whole room green in summer.²⁰⁸

This is a house where life wants to live. It is teeming with creatures making it their home, and filling it with sound, color, and beauty. Just as Mrs. Ramsay is the central figure of the first section of the novel, "The Window," and passes away with brief mention during "Time Passes," a butterfly, too, patters and expires in the same window, equating the life cycles of the resident insects and animals with the previous human occupants. Wildness proliferates in "giant artichokes," "fringed carnations," and other organic forms that make music by "tapping" and "drumming." The "whole room [is] green" with summer's unvanquished ardor. The absence of humans in "Time Passes" isn't necessarily dismal or dreadful. In fact, this representation of heretofore overlooked nonhuman life is the epitome of the kind of unexpected, unacknowledged, ordinary life that Woolf's "Modern Fiction" champions. As Doyle explains, "Woolf and Merleau-Ponty interlace life with death, trace the intertwining of emptiness and fullness, and in this different way 'triumph' over the finality of death."²⁰⁹ When the narrator imagines what would happen if the house were completely overtaken by nature, its structural transformation has beauty even for other humans who might come there: "In the ruined room, picnickers would have lit their kettles; lovers sought shelter there, lying on the bare boards; and the shepherd stored his dinner on the bricks, and the tramp slept with his coat round him to ward off the cold."²¹⁰ This imagined fate of the "ruined" house still insists on life residing there. Even

if it loses its identity as an upper-class vacation cottage, the home would still shelter other lives. It would witness other joys, other meals, and other sleepers.

Thus, while erosion and loss are present in "Time Passes," interpreted ecocritically, they represent more than what Julia Briggs describes as "a sense of nature as impervious to human suffering, blind and silent, a sadly familiar theme in twentieth-century literature."²¹¹ It includes this theme, but the narrative in "Time Passes" also moves beyond it into something more inclusive and hopeful, as Adrienne Bartlett illuminates:

The understanding that humanity will not ever fully grasp the truth or meaning or temperament of the world's natural forces is not a wholly pessimistic point of view, if considered within the proper context. Small connections, such as those made by Mrs. Ramsay, are nonetheless markedly insightful when achieved. Rather, such a viewpoint puts life into a healthier perspective for many human beings; it is one that greatly humbles.²¹²

Additionally, the novel as a whole doesn't make nature the only agent "impervious to suffering." In "The Lighthouse" section, another death occurs in brackets: "[Macalister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]"²¹³ The repetition of the brackets encapsulating just two sentences narrating extreme and sudden suffering references the human deaths in "Time Passes." Some of the soldiers who fought in the war may have been similarly punctured by shrapnel that exploded holes in their bodies. They were sacrificed as military bait for a larger political (not environmental) agent. But while Andrew's death "mercifully, was instantaneous," the fish is thrown back "mutilated" but "alive still" in a gruesome image of pain and torture. Nature is not the only agent, or even the primary agent, of suffering. Nature exists for itself in this novel. It is not at the service of humans; but it isn't an enemy either. Rather, Woolf renders the lives of humans and nonhumans as consistently intertwined. Merleau-Ponty explains that "far from opening upon the blinding light of pure Being or of the Object, our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an atmosphere."²¹⁴ That atmosphere is comprised by the same elements that Woolf integrates into her rhythmic structure:

It is constantly enshrouded by those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of the human life, the present and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with between them all, that cohesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergences of one same something.²¹⁵

Human and nonhuman characters are distinct, but Woolf provides evidence that there is a tremendous enveloping presence of many different kinds of beings that are all born, create nests, confront peril or interference, perish, and persist.

Nonhuman life exists in the house even when the Ramsays are still in residence. It is referenced in Mrs. Ramsay's reflections on what the children (the next generation) talk about:

Anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; seabirds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl who was sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long filled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing. Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh, that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsey deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense.²¹⁶

While Mrs. Ramsay may not fully appreciate the significance of her children's debates – the new mode of talking about “anything, everything” – her eclectic list represents the kind of conglomeration of everyday life experiences, human and nonhuman, divergent yet shared, that form the stuff of modern fiction. The planks don't separate rooms and lives into hierarchies of upstairs and downstairs; they let sound and light pass through, allowing often overlooked people and things to be known. The presence of another's grief for a lost family member is part of the atmosphere. Bats and beetles live there. The sea is also there, brought in by human activity, but also anticipating the natural erosion of the house in “Time Passes.” As Merleau-Ponty elucidates, a representation of embodied life reveals that there is no “pure Being”; it is “a pell-mell ensemble” of entities that have their own unique divergences, yet also share a common space of experience that “twist[s] into the very fibre of being,” the very essence of an embodied life.

The novel rejects the belief that nature and humans are “one,” or that the nonhuman functions to reflect human experience; instead it privileges an intertwined relationship between the two. Mrs. Ramsay indulges in an older form of pathetic fallacy: “She thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees; streams; flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one; in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for

oneself.”²¹⁷ The paratactic style emphasizes simplistic correlation in its short repetitive clauses. Mrs. Ramsey’s sentiment expresses a desire for nature to always be in sympathy with human existence. But it isn’t, as the narrator reminds us in a description of the “perfectly indifferent chill night air.”²¹⁸ “Time Passes” marks the repudiation of the pathetic fallacy: “Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror . . . the mirror was broken.”²¹⁹ Woolf creates a nonhuman representation that functions not merely to define the human characters, either as antagonistic foil or sympathetic mirror. These other lives exist for themselves within a shared world. Rendering the environment through embodied perception creates an awareness that nonhuman life is distinct from human concerns and yet participates in and responds to the same events and stimuli.

Mrs. McNab’s song toward the end of “Time Passes” expresses this paradox of fragmentation and cohesion – lives that share similarities, but are not identical. Mrs. McNab acts as the airs that fingered and wore the walls of the house. As she “rolled from room to room, she sang. Rubbing the glass.”²²⁰ Eroding and cleaning are given a similar feel. The song she sings to pass the time as she works combines light with dark, optimism with despair, “as if, after all, she had her consolations, as if indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope.”²²¹ Who or what is producing the song becomes unclear:

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, disservered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a dorbeetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonizing, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonized, and at last, in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls.²²²

Here is the mosaic of life experience. Importantly, Woolf offers no ecstatic union, but an effort, a “half-heard melody,” which in its repeating patterns “is always on the verge of harmonizing.” This verge, the strain to understand, creates a tension between order and chaos that never lapses into either, but offers suggestive fragments of an alternate conception of the world – it is sensory and perceived only when one is fully listening to the phenomenal world. As Melba Cuddy-Keane puts it, “the effort is to

perceive a pattern in ‘worldly sound’ rather than to create a humanly constructed pattern.”²²³ This idea of another form of coherence and composition that still retains within it gaps and flux symbolizes both the new prose of the modern artist and a new relationship between humans and the environment. It is made of sounds both mechanical (“mowing,” “the squeak of a wheel”) and organic (“a bark,” “a bleat,” “the hum of an insect,” “the jar of a dorbeetle”) as well as the sounds of products of both human and natural making (“the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging”). When war and grief have shattered forms of traditional knowledge – the assurance of Mr. Ramsay’s brand of hierarchical and human-centered philosophy – humans are left to listen to the phenomenal environment. Humans stop positing, and begin questioning. The lapse into silence isn’t failure; it is merely the newness of exercising unused sensory muscles. It represents the struggle to find words that go to the depths of our emotions and most profoundly disturbing revelations of human fragility. Woolf depicts a hitherto unperceived reality that exists beyond but not completely outside of human experience.

Merleau-Ponty associates artistic process with the effort of “bringing truth into being” so that the inner experience of sensation is made visible. He asserts that ecophenomenology “is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.”²²⁴ The effort of rendering physical instinct and emotion into a visible representation is always an act of translation, and it is the effort of transference, imperfect and fluctuating rather than direct and comprehensive, that best expresses the polymorphous state of being. Or, as Merleau-Ponty explains this link between inner sensation and outward sign in another book, “the tactile palpitation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which the palpitation of the eye is a remarkable variant.”²²⁵ Expressing one’s vision through art is one way to communicate the complexities of embodied experience through the medium of hand and eye. This is the new perception that Lily also strives to make visible in her abstract painting of Mrs. Ramsay. Ariane Mildeberg has shown that several modernists are interested in this pre-reflective moment: “Woolf, Stein and Stevens promote such a phenomenological sense of the real as the foundation for expression and creative production alike. All of them step back into *epoché*, seek to expose the world in its pre-giveness and bring to light a pre-conceptual, unmediated experience of this world,” and the character of Lily Briscoe in particular “longs to capture a state of pre-objective freshness on the canvas in front of her.”²²⁶ This longing, however, is not easily fulfilled. Upon returning to the Ramsay summer home after war and death

have intervened, Lily has difficulty identifying and articulating her feelings: “What did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing – nothing that she could express at all.”²²⁷ But what might be taken for an evacuation of sensation actually anticipates Lily’s own journey toward illumination, her own voyage to the lighthouse. As Bourne-Taylor and Mildeberg note about modernist literature more generally, “In the interstices of nothingness and meaninglessness there are vestigial moments of revelation. Negativity contains the seeds of liberation, and ultimately formulates its affirmative potential and creativity.”²²⁸ Similarly, Lily begins with a feeling of nothingness but translates that emotion into embodied creativity that is not just of her own making, but in concert with the logos of the world. Her memories, the figure of Mrs. Ramsay, and the significance of the lighthouse, both as a symbol and an actual journey toward a specific place, must be filtered through the sensations she feels standing on the lawn where she stood ten years ago and where now she watches the progress of James’ long-promised trip to the lighthouse. Lily makes her first effort to put brush to canvas:

The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it – a third time. And so pausing and flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space?²²⁹

The first three rhythmical strokes of her brush resemble the three strokes of the lighthouse. The “nervous lines” connote both painting and writing, linking Woolf’s creative efforts with Lily’s. The pauses, blank spaces, and “hollow” of the waves have their place in the pattern of the whole in which “all were related.” The rhythm of the prose loosely suggests a pattern of cohesion with alliteration (“pauses were one part,” “brown running nervous lines”) and repeated grammatical endings (“lightly and swiftly pausing striking,” “no sooner settled there than they enclosed”). The metaphor of the waves makes Lily part of the experience of those in the boat, too; they are alone, parted by growing distance, but still connected to her in sight and thought. Dipping into her color palette, Lily saturates herself in embodied perception:

She began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it

had fallen in with some rhythm which dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current.²³⁰

Lily is directly reacting to the surrounding environment. She is “looking at the hedge” that “dictated to her” the movements of her hand. The hedge, itself, has symbolic significance as a contact zone for human desires to demarcate boundaries or “lines” in landscape and nonhuman habitats that take over and claim hedgerow spaces, making them a lush example of the complicated nexus between human and nonhuman, where the ostensible human purposes of ownership become transformed and enriched by the abundance of nonhuman animals and plants that grow within them. Yet, Lily doesn’t create an image of the hedge on her canvas; rather, the hedge makes itself known to her so that she can be caught in the current of ambient life around her and learn how to express it. The outer world is not the product of her own conscious thought; instead, it is what inspires her thought and action. As Doyle notes, this form of artistic expression differs from the style of previous generations: “Art herein ‘takes its place among the things it touches’ and, in this way more than any other, art is political. Redefining art in this way, Lily and Woolf avoid the Romantic model of art-making in which the artist engages in materiality only to transcend it.”²³¹ Contrary to the art of the Romantics, Lily’s embodied perception guides her art and “thinks itself within her.” Wendy Wheeler’s explanation illuminates this key moment in the novel: “Nature isn’t just ‘out there’, but is *in us all*. This is a different way of thinking about humans as being ‘in place’, in which we discover ourselves as being in place, not only in virtue of social role, but in virtue of our being placed as processes of being in a processual web of natural, social and cultural life. . . . It is the semiotic of ethic responding: both responsibility and responsiveness.”²³² Lily hears the dictates of the hedge within herself and responds. Lily allows a space for the hidden hollow from which she translates how the world “rays” its colors and expresses the “many-tongued syllabing” of leaves, birds, and other comingled lives within the hedge. She gives expression to the latency that had been “nothing” she could translate, rendering it visible. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty uses Proust to describe how the “little phrase” of remembered music is “only ‘bare values substituted for the mysterious entity he had perceived, for the convenience of his understanding.’”²³³ The full complexity of the idea it represents is necessarily veiled, which:

give[s] us the assurance that the ‘great unpenetrated and discouraging night of our soul’ is not empty, is not ‘nothingness’; . . . The carnal texture [of other invisible presences] presents to us what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing.²³⁴

For Lily, the hollows of the wave, the invisible presence of Mrs. Ramsay, and the silent ambient world are “a negativity that is not nothing.” They animate her hand and she creates shapes from their impulses. Difficult to articulate, more felt than understood, they nonetheless form the basis of the outwardly visible creation of her painting. Merleau-Ponty aids our understanding of how the painting paints itself within her:

We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us. The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must ‘dash on his bow’ to follow it. And these open vortexes in the sonorous world finally form one sole vortex in which the ideas fit in with one another.²³⁵

As with Mrs. McNab’s song in “Time Passes,” sound and sight are part of a shared sensory engagement with the environment. What one produces, either intellectually or physically, is a visible register not of one’s own sole accomplishment, but of how the multiple forces of the ecophenomenological field filter “through” the instrument of our being. Object and subject, nature, human, creativity, are part of a larger material transformation: “Everything in the physical environment enacts a complex dynamic between social subjects and material processes not reducible to a subject-object binary.”²³⁶ Whether music, painting, or prose, the creative act is achieved in concert with the “invisible” dictates of the material and ecophenomenological world.

In terms of grief and loss, this understanding is transformative. If the bringing into being of an experience relies on the presence of what isn’t there – the kinetic energy of absence and the metamorphosis of matter – to give form and substance to what remains, then even death is part of life’s energy. Lily’s body registers her grief, but also shows how it can make Mrs. Ramsay’s memory gain in meaning and significance:

How could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty.) It was one’s body feeling, not one’s mind.

The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly extremely unpleasant. To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain . . . Oh, Mrs. Ramsay! she called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again. . . . Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a center of complete emptiness.²³⁷

The steps, the chair, and the puppy are all part of a material reality that draws attention to the figure that is no longer there. Visible and invisible mingle through the perceiving artist's body. The "curves and arabesques" are suggestive of not only painted arcs demarcating the boundaries of blank space and painted object, but also handwriting that curves and loops to form words. These lines demarcate emptiness, but the blank space also allows the viewer to see the marks. They both work together. Emptiness and death are infused with memory, creating the upsurge of life. There is something palpable in the hollows left behind that actually produces signification. In this regard, death is, to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty, the "secret blackness" that makes life significant.²³⁸

This may not be the response the characters desired to find in their repeated questioning of what makes life worthwhile or whether their life has meaning, but it is an answer Lily's experience offers her. She contemplates the surprising paradox of momentary permanence:

The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying 'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation.²³⁹

Lily recognizes that the illuminations of truth, like the lighthouse beams that pulse in and out of sight, are ephemeral revelations. There is no single, lasting truth, but a series of flickering moments that offer meaning for our lives. Daily experience is the great revelation meekly waiting to be recognized. Such epiphanies are ignited by overlooked material forces, or as Serpil Oppermann explains it, the daily "storied matter" that is "inseparable from the storied human in existential ways" that converge on a "fusion of horizons" where "we find creative materiality encoded in the collective poetry of life."²⁴⁰ A poetry both artists, Lily and Mr. Carmichael, seem to

somehow share when they stand together at the moment of the Ramsay's presumed arrival at the Lighthouse: "They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything."²⁴¹

This acknowledgement, far from causing Lily dependency, offers a more positive interpretation of the "somethingness" inherent in the "nothingness" of darkness or silence. Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay's silences and praises the potential of the unknown, the expressiveness of feeling that isn't neatly captured in human discourse:

Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren't things spoiled then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren't we more expressive thus? The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment.²⁴²

This "lack" of sound, this silent hollow, is full of meaning. The richness of silent experience may even be "spoiled" by reducing it to a visible or auditory communication. The text moves back and forth between times when characters yearn for someone to speak – Mrs. Ramsay with her husband at points, Lily with Augustus Carmichael on the lawn – and other moments when the characters prefer a silence nevertheless replete with understanding. The parenthetical "(it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side)" encapsulates a thought that does not directly participate in the sentence it is within, enacting a kind of alternative aside that replicates the potential of what may not be communicated directly. Similarly, Lily encapsulates a bubble of silence in the earth itself, covering it in a hole hollowed out in the sand: "The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment." This gesture has connotations of both death and life embedded within it. The verb "bury" might make the act an effort to inter the revelation, but the word "fertile" competes with it. Suddenly, the burial becomes a planting, the seed of an idea about the power of silence and uncertainty as a promise of potential. Ecomaterialism challenges us to see such metaphors as a medium for ecological consciousness. In the words of Hubert Zapf: "As in biosemiotics, metaphor emerges as a mode of biological, mental, and textual-semiotic operation that translates these processes into language and cultural discourse."²⁴³ The gap of signifier and signified, like the empty space that allows the stroke to become apparent, or functions simultaneously as grave and planting, is the human way of writing a world so

replete with more-than-human narrative it can only be expressed with the abstract, which gestures toward the multifarious potential of what exceeds direct representation.

The novel's final pages insist on multiplicity as a type of truth. Distance and one's situated perspective become crucial to understanding the "whole" or full meaning of a moment, person, or object. Both distance and subjective perspective are embodied perceptions: "The relations between things or aspects of things hav[e] always our body as their vehicle."²⁴⁴ Our body's situatedness in relation to the world allows us to know how distance and perspective function: "Lily stepped back to get her canvas – so – into perspective."²⁴⁵ Lily creates distance between herself and her painting to see it more clearly. Woolf's prose also enacts this process as the dashes create distance between the two halves of the sentence, the "so" in the center representing the moment Lily's clarity coalesces. Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay gazing out to the sea asking, "Is it a boat? Is it a cork? . . . 'Is it a boat? Is it a cask?' Mrs. Ramsay said. And she began hunting round for her spectacles."²⁴⁶ Mrs. Ramsay, as one should now expect, desires to identify accurately what she sees as a fixed solid object. Lily's memory at this moment also invokes another kind of perspective – her perspective through time. Remembering this moment as she herself is standing at the water's edge – taking note of the progress of the boat containing Mr. Ramsay, James, Cam, and the fishing boy, which appears small against the horizon – makes Mrs. Ramsay's statement anticipate the present moment that Lily recalls her into. She and Lily are in the same place, noting the same sensation. Perspective and distance are not just a matter of space, but also a matter of time. Yet in contrast to Lily's revelations concerning momentary truth, Mrs. Ramsay wanted to know if what she saw was one thing or the other – which is true and which is false. But the section's third example of distance and perspective replaces objective truth with subjective truth. James is also contemplating his past desire to see the lighthouse with his present approach as he finally nears the monument that had so occupied his imagination as a child:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now –

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too.²⁴⁷

As James gets closer to the lighthouse, both through time and through distance, he perceives it differently. From the faraway and nostalgic perspective, the lighthouse has appeared another animate being gazing at him, but now, in the present moment of his educated older self, he sees the close-up details that render it more concrete and less idealized. Unlike his mother's desire to determine if what she saw was a cork or a boat, James affirms that an object can be more than one thing. Moving to a different place, either in time or space, allows us to know more about the subject. It doesn't deny the prior understanding, but contributes to it, ultimately multiplying the subject's meaning and significance. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "We do not think then that the dichotomy of Being and Nothingness continues to hold when one arrives at the descriptions of nothingness sunken into being. . . . Could we not express this simply by saying that for the intuition of being and the intuition of nothingness must be substituted a *dialectic*?"²⁴⁸ To know what the lighthouse means does not require choosing between the physical presence of its "being" in the present and the "nothingness" of its felt atmosphere that was his past perception of it. Indeed, it is an entity only recognized in the tension of dialectic that sustains both understandings. In a similar fashion, Woolf has continued to rework and reimagine the lighthouse as a reoccurring symbol throughout the novel. The lighthouse's ability to carry multiple meanings for multiple characters doesn't negate its effectiveness, but rather enriches its power to communicate a variety of emotions to the reader.

A variety of revisions allows us to gain a deeper appreciation of not only material objects, but also people. Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay from multiple perspectives in an effort to understand her better: "There must be people who disliked her very much, Lily thought . . . People who thought her too sure, too drastic. Also her beauty offended people probably."²⁴⁹ Lily's indulgence in a variety of imagined perspectives doesn't diminish Mrs. Ramsay as much as round her out so she is seen from all sides, the light and the dark. She does this when considering Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's marriage too: "But it would be a mistake, she thought, thinking how they walked off together, arm in arm, past the greenhouse, to simplify their relationship. It was no monotony of bliss – she with her impulses and quicknesses; he with his shudders and glooms."²⁵⁰ Indeed, the idea of sustained perfection is a "monotony" and a reduced "simplif[ication]" of the truth, which must admit a more nuanced and fluctuating existence. Although it might expose something "dark" to acknowledge that the marriage has had its difficulties and disappointments, those perspectives are necessary to complete the picture of the Ramsays and to reach a full understanding of the "truth"

of their lives together. Mr. Bankes' comments on Lily's initial attempt at the painting in the first section of the novel points toward this process: "A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light there required a shadow there."²⁵¹ Forms that are more abstract than concrete, which balance light with shadow, are the very forms Lily is after; they are the most expressive. Indeed, these are also the techniques Woolf employs in her modernist prose.

To take Mrs. Ramsay's perspective as the main or singular viewpoint of the novel is reductive and obscures the work's larger significance. Julia Briggs argues that "Mrs. Ramsay has struggled to make 'Time stand still,' to create pools of tranquility in the midst of flux, and for this she will be remembered by her children, by Lily in her painting and by the novel itself, for the art of holding back time's swift foot, the recurrent theme of Shakespeare's sonnets, belongs as much to Mrs. Ramsay as it does to the artist Lily Briscoe or the novelist Virginia Woolf."²⁵² While this perspective is certainly one of the prominent views voiced in the novel and Briggs's analysis of it is insightful, the quote suggests that it is the primary attitude endorsed by the work as a whole. Yet Woolf presents Mrs. Ramsay's desire to make life and love forever happy or to make an object "stand still" as a potentially outdated mode of thinking that gets reworked as the novel culminates in a wider proliferation of meanings. Lily's perspective of multiplicity, in concert with James and possibly even the silent artist, Mr. Carmichael, is at least equally persistent. The impulses of stasis and flux interact dialectically. However, as I have shown, the novel moves toward the revelation that joy is temporal and truths are multiple. Uncertainty – the twisting together of various fibers that never settle into one fixed meaning – is relished. As in "Time Passes," the fissures in language throughout the novel admit life and the potential of new meanings that reside in what is left unsaid. As the novel progresses, the kaleidoscopic angles on various themes fall into new patterns. They gain in vitality. Flux isn't merely the moving sea within which humans drown; it nurtures the very beginnings of human life in its most basic forms and carries humans along in its current.

When Lily makes the final stroke on her canvas, she is no longer concerned with the likelihood that the finished piece will be forgotten. Instead, what gives it value is her own experience in creating it, the effort it produced, the journey she took in recording her sensations:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines

running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.²⁵³

The vision is her own. It doesn't need to be valued by others to have value for her. The "attempt at something" matters, not the thought "it would be destroyed." Her vision is momentary, but she is alert for it. She is "recalled" into her body and her work by some outside stimuli and achieves unity in a match-like flash of intense illumination. The line in the center of the short declarative sentence "There it was – her picture" expresses the brief, concentrated force of her inspiration. Her impulse to finish by "dr[a]w[ing] a line there, in the center" is replicated in the horizontal dash in the center of the sentence. The "line" once again connotes the shared project of painting and writing. Part of the reader's pleasure is in the teeming potential of the "line" that unifies the work. Its significance is uncertain. Does it represent the upright line of a tree, which Lily visualized in the tablecloth during the first scene? Is it Mrs. Ramsay? Does the line's presence through the center of the painting indicate that unification is found through acknowledging division? Does it symbolize the lighthouse that radiates from the center of the novel?²⁵⁴ Perhaps, as James discovers, it is all this and more. That multiplicity of significance gives it a meaning that is uncertain and yet more complete than any single answer. The idea of interconnection extends to the generations of readers who come after Woolf, with their own subjective perspectives. The uncertainty of the concluding image in *To the Lighthouse* challenges readers to have their own personal moments of vision – we must contribute to the ongoing meaning of Lily's final stroke and of Woolf's novel as a whole. This is what makes the text live on.