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**NATURAL SELECTION: VIRGINIA WOOLF's USE OF NATURE IN
*TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

by

RICHARD D. SEIBERT, JR.

A THESIS

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for
the degree of Master of Arts
in
The Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville**

HUNTSVILLE, AL

2011

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10/31/2011

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Submitted by Richard D. Seibert, Jr. in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

The School of Graduate Studies
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Degree: Master of Arts College/Dept.: Liberal Arts/English

Name of Candidate: Richard D. Seibert, Jr.

Title: Natural Selection: Virginia Woolf's Use of Nature in *To the Lighthouse*

As with many of her Modern contemporaries, Virginia Woolf sought to remove the influence of personal ego from her writing. In *To the Lighthouse*, she achieves this goal through her incorporation of Nature. With the notable exception of the "Time Passes" section, Woolf develops the characters through the connections to the natural world. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's individual attitudes and responses toward Nature affect the degree to which they are separated or united as a couple. Together, the Ramsays gravitate toward Nature as a place to resolve the conflicts emanating from the home and marriage. William Bankes and Lily Briscoe bridge the dichotomy between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of art through their shared manipulation and experience of Nature. Ultimately, as an expression of Woolf's atheistic mysticism, Nature exists as a divine substitution for humanity's artificial construction of God, offering an escape from the ultimate expression of "I."

Abstract Approval: Committee Chair Danist Schenker 11/1/11

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION AND SELECTED CRITICISM.....	1
II. DOMESTICITY AND DOMINATION: THE RAMSAY FAMILY AND THE NATURAL WORLD.....	18
III. THE SCIENTIFIC VISION AND ARTISTIC SUBJECTIVITY OF NATURE: LILY BRISCOE'S AND WILLIAM BANKES' COMMUNION WITH NATURE AND ONE ANOTHER.....	41
IV. CONCLUSION.....	59
V. WORKS CITED.....	69
V. WORKS CONSULTED.....	74

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND SELECTED CRITICISM

"...[W]hen sympathies seemed to waken beyond the reach of circumstances, the great satisfaction was to be had from impersonal things. There were smells and flowers and dead leaves and chestnuts..." (Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being).

"For a while I adhered to a rule of waiting to make important decisions until I could do it in a setting of hills and trees....Ideas that seemed crystal-clear in isolation always became muddled and complicated when put in a human context" (William Tucker, Progress and Privilege).

Like several of her Modern contemporaries, Woolf is a writer who aspires to remove "self" from her art, finding it a hindrance in her craft. In *A Room of One's Own* she proclaims, "One must strain off what [is] personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth" (25). In homage to this aspiration, she praises other writers who engage their craft with an impersonal passion. For example, she celebrates Shakespeare as a writer who epitomizes this valued ideal:

...[H]is grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. We are not held up by some 'revelation' which reminds us of the writer. All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded. If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare. (*AROO* 56)

In her own work, Woolf creates writing devoid of her own “grudges, spites, and antipathies” in an effort to absolve it from the “impediments” created by the suffusion of personal identity. She does so partly by infusing the qualities and values of Nature¹ into the characters within her fiction. By associating the characters in the novels with Nature, she designs a method of shedding the influence of her own identity from even her most personally revealing fictional narratives. Thus, much of the catharsis achieved through writing from Nature stems from the purging of a nebulous and transitory “I”. As Woolf writes in *Moments of Being*, “[P]eople live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their *indifference* that they are comforting” (“On Being Ill” 16, emphasis added). Neither selfish nor judgmental, Nature invites humanity into harmony with it simply through its non-egoistical existence. If for Woolf, then, the subjectivity of ego burdens the success of human relationships and even their existence, then the objectivity of Nature comforts and enables them. Furthermore, if Woolf sees divisive and boisterous egotism as a representation of undesirable masculinity, then the silent indifference of Nature qualifies it as inherently feminine. The conflict that results from those dichotomies will help form the basis of much of the discussion in this study.

Tracing the origin of Modernity to the French poet Charles Baudelaire, Peter Nichols points to its urban beginnings, adding that “[t]he city could become a theatre of vendettas, surveillance, and bitter psychological conflict” (17). Moreover, in this setting, “[w]riters could either retreat...into pastoral fantasy...or they could plunge into the urban chaos, moving into the crowd...” (Nichols 17). Most of Virginia Woolf’s Modern contemporaries took the latter route within their writing. T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of

¹ Throughout this project, I capitalize the word “Nature,” as I see as Nature encompassing all earthly and celestial elements and processes, as well as all human and non-human animals. I contend that only the human ego exists outside of Nature.

J. Alfred Prufrock,” for example, epitomizes the voyeuristic detachment found within many individuals living inside modern urbanity. In the midst of the noise of the city crowds and the egocentricity of social parties, Prufrock chooses psychological distance, preferring the life of a silent observer. In this regard, Modern writers like Eliot have become closely associated with the environment of the city, a distinct departure from the environmental focus of their Romantic predecessors. In “The Word Split It’s Husk: Woolf’s Double Vision of Modernist Language,” Bonnie Kime Scott agrees, noting that “the natural and contemplative modes detected in Woolf suggests an affinity to romantic tradition, an aspect of modernism suppressed in much of the canonical criticism from Eliot to Hugh Kenner” (375).²

Like other members of the Bloomsbury Group, then, Woolf’s perspective of Nature differs from many of her (predominately male) Modern contemporaries. Both Leonard and Virginia Woolf, for example, frequented the zoo and maintained gardens. Wyndham Lewis, the artist and writer noted for his criticism of the group, “found Bloomsbury too close to nature” (Scott 110).³ As someone who “relegated nature to an inferior, feminine position in the hierarchy of creativity and control,” Lewis unsurprisingly and characteristically created a “landscape [that] ...was an urban, technologically-inspired grid-work” (Scott 110). In contrast, Woolf often uses the natural world to deconstruct the isolation bred within modern urban life. She often replaces the isolating crowd of the city with the unifying and comforting impersonality of Nature. In *Solid Objects*, while Douglas Mao does not portray Woolf as focused on ecological

² Kime proposes ecocritical readings for other relatively unexplored territories: “ [T]here is a lot of room for greening of modernism...and would place T. S. Eliot...high on the list of those susceptible to such rereading” (“Beyond Boundaries,” 110).

³ Many scholars point to Wyndham’s 1930 satire *The Apes of God* as his most famous and scathing criticism of Bloomsbury, although he attacked Woolf personally in *Men Without Art*.

concerns exclusively, he does differentiate between her attitude toward Nature and that of her (predominately male) contemporaries:

[T]here [is not] much point in trying to portray Woolf as an agrarian reactionary, or the champion of a green sensibility within cosmopolitan modernism. But it is important to note that in calling attention to the subordination of the object world that shadows all human making, ... Woolf marks a point of continuity between her own work and that of other modernists like Pound, Lewis, Williams, and Ransom, who were much more explicitly troubled by the explosive growth of technology, the fragility of the local and the particular, and the erasure of otherness under a globalizing and quantifying modernity. (66)

For Woolf, choosing Nature also means rejecting the “patriarchal machinery” and the “masculine” “avenues of stone and iron railings” (*Letters* 2:379). In doing so, she distinguishes herself as an artist engaging in writing that is not restrained by the parameters established by the men of modernity. Bonnie Kime Scott also supports this correlation between Woolf’s use of Nature and her identity as a female Modern stating that “Woolf’s nature writing is very much a part of her coping with the authorial egotism which arose as an issue particularly as she struggled with the critics and her male modernist counterparts” (“Breaking Boundaries in Nature,” 109). In an earlier essay, Scott again notes the significance and rarity of Woolf’s perspective in relation to those of other Modern writers: “Through a series of architectural and natural metaphors, Woolf found the structure and power to declare that, as a woman, she had a different more varied relation to language than many of her male contemporaries” (“Woolf’s Double Vision,” 372).

Thus, throughout her essays, memoirs, and letters, Virginia Woolf regularly references the natural world. Drawing from her life experiences, Woolf inserts recollections of Nature that often parallel her reflections of childhood and family. Images of beaches, gardens, and animals appear abundantly in her written memories, often coupled with intimate and revealing reminiscences of her family and friends. Those reflections visibly surface in Woolf's fiction as well; her examinations of a personal life shaped by an experiential understanding of Nature extend into the fiction that she creates, especially in her novels. Saturating similes and allegories with the substance of the sky, the sea, and the land, she wraps her characters with figurative language connected deeply—even mythically and psychologically—to Nature. Woolf uses the imagery and symbolism of the natural world—including the animal kingdom— as one method of crafting the personalities in *To the Lighthouse*'s characters and the relationships among and between them. Through the course of this study, I will examine the identity of several characters, probing the extent to which they are developed by their connection to Nature and how their relationships emerge or dissolve as a result of those connections.

As numerous critics have noted, the text of *To the Lighthouse* draws heavily from Woolf's personal memories, with its events loosely modeled after and inspired by summer vacations her family would take to St. Ives, Cornwall. Indeed, many of the characters can easily be discerned as fictional representations of Woolf's own friends, family members, and even Woolf herself. Most obviously, Virginia Woolf uses the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* as surrogates for her own parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen. In this sense, the novel might seem anathematic to Woolf's aim of removing the influence of her own ego from her fictional works, or, at the

very least, a puzzling choice for source material.⁴ However, using elements of her personal life enables Woolf to demonstrate fully the capacity of Nature's impersonality to alleviate the influence of ego. I propose that one of the primary aims of *To the Lighthouse* is to bridge the conflicts that appear within the novel through the mediator of Nature. More specifically, the dichotomies that receive the most attention are the ones within human relationships. Certainly, many of the relationships within the novel typify conflicts that can exist within marriages, families, and personal friendships. Quite often, the conflicts that develop and grow inside these relationships do so along gender lines. But Woolf uses these individual relationships to represent larger social and psychological concerns. And instead of implementing traditional resolutions, Woolf uniquely turns to Nature as a source of solutions. In the subsequent chapters, I will argue that Virginia Woolf uses selective characters' attitudes toward and relationships with the natural world to either bridge or extend the dichotomies found within the novel.

Of course, in the most obvious sense, the coastal setting of *To the Lighthouse* easily lends itself to a discussion of Nature. But that discussion is best facilitated not just by the characters' interaction with the natural world; it is made possible, as I will detail in the upcoming chapters, with their interaction with the other specific characters with whom they share relationships. I begin my analysis with the Ramsay family in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I examine the relationship between William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, illustrating both its similarities and differences from that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

My second chapter, "Domesticity, and Domination: The Ramsay Family and the Natural World," addresses what I view as some of the main components of the novel: the

⁴ In her letters and memoirs, Woolf alternately hesitates to classify *To the Lighthouse* as a novel while on (at least) one other instance she vehemently protests that it is one (*Letters* 4: 82).

Ramsay family, their relationships to one another, and the indifference of Nature. The struggles that emerge in the relationships often mirror the characters' attitudes toward Nature. Their modes of interacting with the natural world often parallel their interactions with one another. Thus, the chapter will uncover the characters' attitudes toward Nature and explore the relationships that develop with it as a result of those attitudes.

Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay, for example, both believe in the necessity of exercising control over the natural world. However, Mrs. Ramsay's idea of control takes the shape of an idealized, maternal domesticity while Mr. Ramsay sees Nature as a force against which he must contend and ultimately dominate. The Ramsay children, I will demonstrate, manifest varying degrees of both of these attitudes in their approach to Nature. In "The Window," the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, I will concentrate on the separation between the characters. Additionally, I will show that many of the polarities that surface in the families' relationships reflect the ways in which they regard and experience the natural world. Those conflicts, though, result from their attachment to ego. As a result, the *solutions* to the disconnections may also be found through the aspects of Nature that unify them and resolve the conflicts, solutions that I will uncover as occurring in the final "Lighthouse" section of the novel. Thus, just as Woolf uses "Time Passes" as a chronological bridge in the novel, she also, I will demonstrate, uses the impersonality of Nature in the section to bridge the characters' detachments found within "The Window."

In the third chapter, "The Scientific Vision and Artistic Subjectivity of Nature: William Bankes and Lily Briscoe's Communion with Nature and One Another," I will examine the relationship between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. Much like Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the couple demonstrates polarities that Woolf reveals through their

association with the natural world. Both Lily Briscoe's and William Bankes' associations with and attitudes toward Nature resemble Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's. William Bankes' vocation as a botanist connects him directly to Nature. However, that identity as a scientist requires that he associates with the natural world objectively. Conversely, Lily Briscoe is an artist whose painting emanates from the subjectivity of her vision. Like Mrs. Ramsay, she attempts to control nature by domesticating it. Both though, I will argue, despite the primary modes of interacting with the natural world, incorporate objective *and* subjective realities into their understandings of Nature.⁵ More significantly, they are joined together through their mutual experience of the natural world. Woolf uses this shared experience of Nature, then, to bridge their dichotomies.

Finally, my concluding chapter examines the role of Nature as a revelation of the divine. Additionally, I examine the successful journey to the Lighthouse and its impact on Mr. Ramsay. As it (at last partially) corresponds to The Lighthouse landing, I explore the closure and understanding that Lily Briscoe attains as she completes her painting.

As Woolf's novel that has received the most critical attention, *To the Lighthouse* has been examined by numerous scholars from perhaps as many angles. As an example of the sheer number of scholarly works devoted to the novel (excluding dissertations), my recent search of the MLA International Bibliography reveals that over the past 50 years (since 1960) 167 articles have been published about it in peer reviewed journals. As an indication of *To the Lighthouse*'s popularity among Woolf scholars, an almost identical number of articles—165—have been published about *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thus, because of this large quantity of writing directed toward the novel, I will focus my review of

⁵ As a loosely related note, William Howarth expresses the belief that "[t]oday science is evolving *beyond* Cartesian *dualism* toward quantum mechanics and chaos theory, where volatile, ceaseless exchange is the norm" (emphasis added, 78).

criticism primarily on the areas that pertain to my own arguments. Through my survey of Woolfian scholarship, I have discovered that many varieties of critical responses to *Lighthouse* use the natural world as a backdrop against which arguments are made instead of using Nature as the central focus of those responses. Feminist writer Jane Lilienfeld, for example, begins her often cited essay “Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsays’ Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*” with the following paragraph:

Virginia Woolf projects the Ramsays’ relation on to the landscape throughout *To the Lighthouse*. Here we see the Ramsays’ marriage, based on love, has imperfections like the hedge. To associate them this way with the rootedness of Mrs. Ramsay’s garden might confuse us as to the soil of their union. Is their relation, so embedded in the flux of the waters, the hills of the land, a perception of eternally true modes of male-female union? (148)

In such cases as Lilienfeld’s in which Nature is used to supplement an argument, gender identity/feminist readings—as well as Freudian, aesthetic, and formalist readings—typically take precedence. Regardless, several notable feminist writers like Lilienfeld, Jane Marcus, and Madeline Moore ⁶ have effectively incorporated Woolf’s use of Nature into their own arguments, even those that are not ecologically based. Ellen Hawkes, for example, in her essay, “Woolf’s ‘Magical Garden of Women,’” wraps her discussion of Virginia Woolf’s ideas of patriarchy and desire for female friendship around Woolf’s own “garden” metaphor for a “[utopian] ...safe surrounding in which women preserve and sanction their shared values derived from their special experiences as ‘outsiders’” (32). While not a literary study, Sherry B. Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature is to

⁶ Regarding *The Waves*, Madeline Moore does offer create an ecologically based analysis of the novel, beginning with the following argument: “[T]here is an organic and inevitable relationship between Woolf’s attitude toward nature and her attitudes toward community” (“Nature and Community,” 219).

Culture” similarly examines women’s subordinated status, arguing that such status derives from their closer association with nature. Men, Ortner maintains, have a closer association to culture and “culture’s project [is] to subsume and transcend nature” (73).

Recently, however, a few writers have begun responding to Virginia Woolf through ecocriticism and ecofeminism. One such ecofeminist critic, Bonnie Kime Scott, notes that while “relatively little has been written about Woolf’s ecofeminist potential ...or her attitude toward the environment,” during the Sixteenth Annual International Woolf Conference “two full panels were dedicated to Woolf from the environmental perspective” (108). In her own conference paper, “Virginia Woolf, Ecofeminism, and Breaking Boundaries in Nature,”⁷ Scott addresses the limitations that exist within the natural world and the way in which Woolf confronts them:

I am particularly concerned with the boundaries on nature—where the cultivated garden meets the moors or the woods or is invaded by ‘wild pests,’ where exotic plants and animals import echoes of the Empire, where science divides the species, or an artist like Woolf traverses such boundaries to think like a moth, take in the perception of a snail, or the motion of a flock of birds. (108)

Scott, who boldly labels Woolf “as a proto-ecofeminist”(108), comments on the “environmental holism” that she sees Woolf embracing (109). Similarly, in “Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and an Ecology of Language,” ecofeminist writer Elizabeth Waller addresses Woolf’s holistic view of Nature especially as it is manifested in her use of language. While Waller’s essay does not specifically make reference to *To the Lighthouse*, the arguments within it certainly have applicability to the novel. The most

⁷ Scott indicates that she is progressing toward the completion of book manuscript entitled *Virginia Woolf’s Uses of Nature* (108).

applicable of them is Waller's claim that Woolf, in a "key [element] in her process of environmental awakening," demonstrates an "early understanding that human bodies can merge with a collective earth-body which, via corporeal experience, alters cognitive perception" (138). The claim relates closely to my argument that Woolf uses Nature to create a cohesive unity between and among characters in the *To the Lighthouse*.

However, because the Ramsay (and Stephen) family vacations along the coast in the countryside and makes their permanent residence in the city, many non-feminist writers (and feminist ones)—unlike the ones cited above—may well view Nature as a temporary experience for the characters in the novel, therefore failing to resonate within them as strongly as the experience of Victorian society or their Modern urban existence.⁸ This viewpoint may well explain in part why few critical works have focused on Virginia Woolf's association with the natural world. Thus, in the remainder of this section I will include critical works—and portions of those works—that focus both directly *and* indirectly on Nature within the novel as well as the importance of the natural world to Woolf as a writer. In doing so, I will direct my focus toward the main characters—beginning with Mrs. Ramsay—that I explore in the following chapters of this study.

Woolf devotes much of *To the Lighthouse* to the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Arguably strained and often enigmatic, it shapes Lily's perception of marriage, her artistic vision, and her attitude toward other characters in the novel. Even after Mrs. Ramsay's death, the relationship continues, as Lily's thoughts and actions are saturated with memories of her. Thus, unsurprisingly, scholars have written

⁸ Scott Russell Sanders makes a similar assessment in his essay "Speaking a Word for Nature," arguing that "[i]n the work of British novelists from Defoe and Fielding through Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf..., the social realm—the human morality play—is a far more powerful presence than nature" (183).

extensively on their relationship, often claiming that is the most important relationship in the novel. Jane Lilienfeld's article "'The Deceptiveness of Beauty': Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*" famously portrays Mrs. Ramsay as the "Great and Terrible Mother" who possesses the power, like Mother Nature, to create, transform, and even destroy. That power, however, is not limited solely to the relationships with her biological children, although it certainly does permeate those relationships. Writing from feminist and ecological perspectives, Lilienfeld demonstrates that it is Mrs. Ramsay's identity as Earth Mother that defines and affects her relationship with Lily Briscoe, whom she characterizes as a marginalized surrogate daughter.⁹ Fittingly, Lilienfeld reserves a notable amount of her commentary to the imagery and allegorical qualities of bees, the moon, and the sea, all of which have mythological and psychological grounding in maternal symbolism. In my own examination of Mrs. Ramsay, I also implement these specific images and symbols as a means of more fully revealing her connection to Nature. As important, through that connection to Nature, Mrs. Ramsay retains—and uses—the power to unite and divide.

Like Lilienfeld's article, Bruce Bassoff's "Tables in Trees: Realism in *To the Lighthouse*" also primarily focuses on the ways in which Nature is instrumental in shaping the identities of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe and their relationship. However, Bassoff also offers a more generalized view of Woolf's intended use of Nature. He maintains that "[f]or Virginia Woolf,...writing from nature is realizing certain psychological states...(424). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, Septimus, likely suffering from "shell shock," experiences his most severe moment of alienation from society when

⁹ In "Lily Briscoe's Vision: The Articulation of Silence," Theresa L. Crater echoes Lilienfeld's argument, characterizing Mrs. Ramsay as "the fertile all-providing earth mother to her children and husband" (125).

surrounded by nature, even small urban pockets of it within the city park. However, this type of episode reappears more often and with more thematic and contextual intensity in *To the Lighthouse*, most notably within Mrs. Ramsay and her daughters Nancy and Cam. In two separate scenes involving Cam and Nancy, for example, both daughters psychologically—and almost physically—descend into the sea, moving away from those around them while simultaneously embracing a parent. Portions of Bassoff's argument will function as a means of defending some of my own arguments about Woolf's use of Nature. However, when Bassoff asserts that Woolf "reveals...the crucial problem of 'realism'[as] not the relation between subject and object but the relation between subject and mediator...", he equates the mediator as "the Other" (425). I contend that Nature itself acts as the mediator and should not be defined as existing simply externally—and, thus, identified as an explicit "Other"—but, rather, as an experience that resonates internally.¹⁰ In this regard, the characters' shared internalized experience of Nature creates a commonality between and among them, replacing the Otherness of personal egos.

A portion of my second chapter, "Domesticity and Domination," concerns the roles of animals in *To the Lighthouse*, specifically in regard to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. While the appearance and functionality of animal life in Virginia Woolf's writing has received some amount of commentary, much less has been devoted to it compared to other aspects of the natural world. Typically, critics consolidate animals into a more generalized discussion of Nature in Woolf's writing. Wendy B. Farris, however, constructs an argument pertaining to animal life found in Virginia Woolf's literary and

¹⁰ Madeline Moore's "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*" supports and furthers this argument for that novel.

social circle, and in Woolf's own writing. In "Bloomsbury's Beasts: The Presence of Animals in the Texts and Lives of Bloomsbury," she suggests the following about the inclusion of animals in the personal and literary life of Woolf:

[A]nimals in the texts and lives of Bloomsbury serve three main functions. First, they embody repressed individual emotions or unresolved social issues; secondly, they represent reverent feelings of connection with the cosmos. Furthermore, that animals serve both as outlets for repressed emotions and vehicles to express cosmic relatedness means that they also serve a third function: they help construct the delicate web of communal feelings and mysterious connections that comprises Virginia Woolf's 'luminous envelope' of life itself. (107-108)

Animals, Faris maintains, often "signal a number of covert presences, figuring the emotional, [and] the mystical..." qualities of characters (109). Faris also supports the Kristevan idea that "Bloomsbury's beasts may remind [the reader] of the 'instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother'" (107). In keeping with Lilienfeld's—and others'—portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay as the archetypal mother, the attachments that other characters have toward her can be read as desiring to maintain the relationship with their own mother.¹¹

From a Freudian perspective, solitary animals, especially "misbehaving" ones, may reveal "hidden, unsocial selves" (Faris 110). Their actions seemingly offer a solution to the inadequacies of human communication and the spoken word and act upon desires restrained by adherence to social regulations. While Faris associates this notion with "[t]he (reportedly) rather savage act of the Ramsay's dog [that] bites Mr. Tansley..."

¹¹ Because of his marked psychological distance from Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Carmichael is the only character in the novel whose animal identity defies such a classification.

(109), I find the scene darkly comical, but see Mr. Ramsay's canine association as a more relevant and expansive expression of the "hidden, unsocial sel[f]."

My third chapter concerns the characters Lily Briscoe and William Bankes as well as the relationship between them. With much more criticism devoted to Briscoe than to Bankes, much of that criticism has focused on or included a discussion of Lily Briscoe's art. As I will more specifically argue later, Lily Briscoe's painting is second only to the Lighthouse itself in its centrality to the novel as a force that alternately unites and divides. Lily uses the canvas as a barrier to ward away Mr. Ramsay, and Mrs. Ramsay deems it unworthy of serious attention. Even while Lily often looks to it as a place of sanctuary, she also occasionally finds the task of putting brush and paint to canvas as starkly intimidating. Using art as an outlet through which she approaches Nature, she turns to post-impressionism, a mode and style of painting that gives her the necessary freedom to subjectively interact with the natural world without the restraints of Realism. Douglas Mao formulates an insightful assessment about Woolf's inclusion of art in *To the Lighthouse* that relates to arguments that I will make in later chapters regarding Lily Briscoe's painting:

"...[I]n its concern about the integrity of the object...modernism finally invites the rejection of art in favor of nature. For if the deformations of subjectivity are to be avoided as far as possible, then the residue of the subjective that seems to inform all art, even the most 'classical' or 'impersonal,' will surely make the work less valid and more suspect, in the end, than any natural thing: Shakespeare may be quite impersonal, yet how much more impersonal must be a tree." (70)

In “The Impact of Post-Impressionism,” Sue Roe compactly summarizes the post-impressionistic style and Woolf’s adaptation of the medium’s principles and qualities into her writing, including *To the Lighthouse*. Roe observes that Lily Briscoe and William Banks encounter an impasse in the form of Lily’s painting:

[W]hen he thinks of Mrs. Ramsay, he sees, in his mind’s eye, beauty, and so thinks of the art forms of the past. Accordingly, when he finds himself on the lawn of the Ramsays’ summer house with Lily Briscoe (who is painting Mrs. Ramsay sitting on the steps with her son James) he is confused by the image appearing on the canvas, and wants scientific explanations....(183)

The polarities that Roe extracts from the text represent differences of perception and differences of experience. As a scientist old enough to be the artist Lily Briscoe’s father, William frames his understanding of the art through objective lenses of an earlier time. As Roe contends, “Woolf juxtaposes classical iconography with the effort of post-impressionism [in order] to construct forms which are equivalent images for, rather than scientific representations of, the things—or figures—seen” (183). She accurately assesses that the creation of such a juxtaposition allows Woolf to demonstrate the “haunting” nature of the past, adding that Lily Briscoe may struggle to “[depict] Mrs. Ramsay...because she cannot admit the past into the present” (Roe 183).¹² However, Roe fails to note that the widower William Banks finds it difficult to *see* Mrs. Ramsay in Lily’s painting for the same reason.

Finally, in contrast to critical responses to the Ramsays and Lily Briscoe, few pieces of writing have been published exclusively about William Banks. As a relatively

¹² In “Behind the Purple Triangle: Art and Iconography in *To the Lighthouse*,” Jane De Gay asserts that “Lily maintains a precarious balance between honoring the memory of Mrs. Ramsay...and accepting that Mrs. Ramsay is lost and her age is past” (21).

minor character in the novel, even his relationship with Lily Briscoe has not previously sufficed as a reason to include him within critical discussions. Also, the relationship between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes does not travel through the novel as widely and deeply as the one that Lily shares with Mrs. Ramsay. In this regard, I have the opportunity to explore ideas about William Bankes that have not been previously addressed. While Heidi Stalla does write about him in her article “William Bankes: Echoes of Egypt in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” she does not, as the title suggests, include a direct or quantitative discussion of Lily Briscoe’s role in the development of his character. Instead, Stall focuses on the possible historical basis for the character, William Bankes. Her article, however, does implicitly connect the fictional Bankes to Briscoe through a study of the historical Bankes’ art and antiquities collection and his relationship with the androgynous Lady Hester Stanhope. Stalla suggests that Lady Hester Stanhope may correlate to Lily Briscoe, or, in a more daring—and entertaining—suggestion, she proposes that Stanhope may be the model that Woolf uses as basis for self-referential humor. In regard to William Bankes, the transition from a historical art collector to the fictional plant collecting botanist reads as palpable, given both of their attention to detail. More important to my argument, the fictional William Bankes connects to Lily Briscoe through the medium of art, predominately as it relates to his understanding of and relationship to Nature.

CHAPTER 2

DOMESTICITY AND DOMINATION: THE RAMSAY FAMILY AND THE NATURAL WORLD

To the Lighthouse is filled with characters whose complexities and interconnectedness can most easily be understood in relation to their connections with Nature. The autobiographical quality of the novel, however, distinguishes it from Woolf's other works that thematically and symbolically utilize the natural world. Its inherent personal quality demands an even stronger infusion of Nature's impersonality as a mechanism for diffusing the role of ego in its construction. This is most strongly seen in the Ramsay family, especially Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, who are very closely modeled on Woolf's own parents, Julia and Leslie Stephen. To construct an objective portrait of the fictional family modeled after her own, Woolf creates a presentation of the characters that is filtered through their connections to Nature. In doing so, she effectively minimizes the influence of subjective personal memories. Throughout the work, several of the characters often experience their most severe moments of alienation from familial and social connections when surrounded by the natural world. Alternately, as they pull away or are separated from humanity, they absorb their natural surroundings with more intensity and thoroughness. As I will demonstrate, unification with Nature or separation from it occurs both physically and psychologically. To do so, I will continue the chapter with an exploration of the Ramsay family as it relates to Woolf's association of Nature with the feminine. Many of the dichotomies and conflicts that I will explore result from the dualities of gender identity expressed in the novel through attitudes about the natural

world. I will continue the chapter with an analysis of Mrs. Ramsay, who I characterize as an Earth Mother, manipulating Nature through the process of domestication. Next, I will analyze Mr. Ramsay, the family patriarch who seeks to dominate the natural world. Each of them, I will argue, demonstrates a gender based attitude toward Nature. As a couple, these differences sometimes most clearly surface, I will demonstrate in two separate scenes. Significantly, though, both Mrs. Ramsay's domestication of Nature and Mr. Ramsay's domination of it represent two failed models of relations to the natural world. I will then extend my discussion of Woolf's use of Nature to the animal kingdom and the motifs within it that mirror the characters' feminine and masculine attitudes toward the natural world. As I see the Ramsay children as expansions of their parents, I will devote the second part of the chapter to them, with specific focus on Cam and Nancy. More than any of the eight children, the two sisters portray the ability of Nature to bridge dichotomies. Finally, I will examine the way in which the middle section of the novel, "Time Passes," uses the comforting indifference of Nature to bridge the separation between characters.

Even a superficial examination of Mrs. Ramsay reveals a wife, mother, and hostess whose public identity reflects values and customs of Victorian England. However, perhaps more than any of the other characters in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay also exhibits a connection to the Nature that implicitly (and, at times, explicitly) defines her as much as any other of her associations, including marriage, motherhood, and Victorian society. Despite "living" through only "The Window" section of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay's identity permeates and, arguably, dominates all of it. As Jane Lilienfeld notes, she appears as "someone larger than life, a being whose essence is the motherly

quality itself, an all-nourishing, life-giving, archetype” (349). Lilienfeld asserts that as someone “at one with the ocean whose waves lap to the rhythm of her thoughts,... Mrs. Ramsay takes on mythic qualities” (349). However, Lilienfeld designates Mrs. Ramsay’s archetypal status and mythic nature as created predominately from Lily’s needs, desires, and insights (349-350). I maintain instead that Mrs. Ramsay’s *own* thoughts and actions more completely and honestly uncover her relationship to Nature. However, I do agree with Lilienfeld’s classifying of Mrs. Ramsay as a Great and Terrible Mother as it places her within the natural world, without limiting her to the confines of the proximity and identities of the household. I will demonstrate that because Mrs. Ramsay is the character in *To the Lighthouse* most closely associated with Nature, she uses her identity as Earth Mother to bridge the gap between human relationships, an identity I see as closely related to Lilienfeld’s Great and Terrible Mother.

As the nourishing Earth Mother, Mrs. Ramsay often comprehends her own purpose as linked to the cultivation of Nature, an instigator of natural cycles and a gentle proponent of order within Nature as much as within her household. In reference to her life, she deems that “all must be in order” while “insensibly approving of the dignity of the trees’ stillness” (*TTL* 174). Her identity of Earth Mother exists, significantly, as a component of the maternal, spousal, and social role that she enacts within her home and marriage. While in the children’s bedroom, for example, Cam’s fears about the skull on the wall find opposition in James’s fascination with it. Mrs. Ramsay’s maternal instinct seeks to resolve the conflict. By wrapping her shawl around the lifeless bone, she does not, of course, literally restore life to the pig. However, she does successfully reanimate and reclassify it, thereby diminishing the imaginative fears of Cam and demystifying the

experience of shadows that the skull creates. In Fredrick Turner's view, Mrs. Ramsay satisfies the demands of two other dichotomies in the scene, "calming with poetry and art the fear of her daughter...[while] reassur[ing] her son in his philosophical rectitude that the skull is still there" (221). By incorporating Nature into art, she creates connections that her children's egos attempt to avoid. As a mother, she looks for a compromising solution to satisfy both of her children's demands and appeal to both of their opposing sensibilities. Cam, like her mother, finds comfort in the nurturing world of imaginative beauty and an idealized Nature. James, like his father, gains assurance through the dominating power of provable facts. The lifeless skull proves that Nature can be dominated and, ultimately, conquered. By leaving the skull on the wall but draping it with her shawl, Mrs. Ramsay finds a middle ground that appeals to both of them. Through her decoration of the skull, she combines feminine subjectivity and masculine objectivity. Thus, the androgyny of Mrs. Ramsay's artistry represents the transcendence of gender and the divisiveness of their roles.

As the dinner party scene illustrates, Mrs. Ramsay favors order and structure as a means of maintaining harmony both in the natural world and in the artificial constructions of humanity. During the party, her attention to and preference for household order visibly surfaces. In the scene, she internally acknowledges the natural flow of a conversation connoting a unity and an absence of self-consciousness, characteristic of Nature:

[H]er eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the

sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. ...[W]hat they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together....(*TTL* 165)

Although she would normally grasp the opportunity to “net...and separate one thing from another,” Mrs. Ramsay “now [says] nothing” (*TTL* 165-166). With the dinner party progressing in a harmonious, unified balance, she may safely assume the role of Mother Nature at rest.

Mrs. Ramsay most thoroughly escapes the restraints of socially determined identities when solitarily surrounded by those “things” pertaining to Nature. It is during those moments that she begins her immersion into Nature, escaping the duties and worries of family and society. However, they are “things” that she ironically and mistakenly deems as lacking life. Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts reveal what appears as a cognitively dissonant connection and understanding of Nature. She relishes the beauty of the flowers and the garden and even expresses an empathetic affinity for them to the extent that she feels unified with them: “It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were once; felt an irrational tenderness thus...as for oneself” (*TTL* 101). Yet, even as Mrs. Ramsay experiences this unity with the natural world, she does not qualify those “things” within it as alive. She still unconsciously clings to the ideas and practices of domesticity, not connecting them as elemental to her relationship to the natural world. The disassociation instills a desire to escape, to retreat from the superficial transparency of “the surface” to the “unfathomably deep” maternal waters

below (*TTL* 100). As Mrs. Ramsay sits knitting, just before she is bathed in the artificial moonlight of the Lighthouse's beam, she rejoices in the temporal bliss that she experiences:

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity....(*TTL* 100)

Such episodes reveal Mrs. Ramsay's subconscious longing to transcend her role of Angel in the House through a more complete merging with Nature and a shedding of self. The transcendence ultimately occurs after her death when she has become mythologized and the house itself becomes occupied by a collaboration of human memories and life forces that flourish freely, unimpeded by domesticity.¹³

Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts of "children go[ing] through stages" immediately transform into her "considering the dahlias in the big bed" and "wondering about next year's flowers" (*TTL* 105). Since the flowers have matured into a summertime full-bloom, she emotionally navigates toward the buds that will bloom in the spring. In this sense, the perennial dahlias act as surrogates for her children whom she sees disappearing into adolescence and adulthood. The garden represents continuity and the renewal of life. Simultaneously, it renews Mrs. Ramsay's purpose; she retains her status as Earth Mother as the cycle of life continues. Additionally, the flowers, in their literal connection to the earth, represent a harmonious unity with the land and an interconnectedness, equally

¹³ Hermione Lee argues "[t]hrough death and absence, character is merged with nature, and becomes the stuff of folklore and legend." After Mrs. Ramsay's death and the family's departure, "a constant reminder of human consciousness" continues to linger (430), imbedded within the growing wilderness inside the home.

applicable to the dynamics of family. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf recalls the insight she felt while looking at a flower bed in St. Ives:

‘This is the whole’, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leave; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.
(*MOB* 71) ¹⁴

The dahlias are, also, flowers to which Mrs. Ramsay—like Woolf herself—is “alive,” but her “cerebral husband” (Wareham 167) does not notice, except to remark that they “seemed creditable,” (*TTL* 106) drawing a symbolic distinction between his seeming detachment from their children and her more obvious attentiveness to them. Her interest and identity, unlike his, reside with the assurance that “the species” will continue (Lilienfeld 359).

The assurance can read as applicable to the planting of bulbs and the protection of birds and rabbits, as well (*TTL* 105, 93-94, 112). Within her role of protector, Mrs. Ramsay diligently and consciously attempts to maintain control over her children, domesticating the “wild creatures...scampering about over the country all day long” (*TTL* 93). She expresses a curious contentment when she finds “them *netted* (emphasis added) in their cots like birds among cherries and raspberries” (*TTL* 94) much like “[t]he rooks, rising in a net [who] fall into a net upon the elm trees” (“On Being Ill,” 16). Mrs. Ramsay’s primary interest is security; when they are confined, the children are safe.

¹⁴ Following the recollection of the observation, Woolf notes, “It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later” as, I believe, an indirect indication of its inclusion in *To the Lighthouse*. Interestingly, Woolf associates the bed of dahlias with Mrs. Ramsay, not Lily, the character with whom she is often critically associated. Elizabeth Waller also notes this pivotal observation, adding that “the connections between the flower and earth, writing, and Woolf’s vitality seem forever linked from that point forward” (141).

After Paul, Minta, and Andrew fail to come back from the shore, for example, her alignment with Nature signals an alteration in her garden that, in turn, instantly shifts her awareness to the children: “The light in the garden told her that; and the whitening of the flowers and something grey in the leaves conspired to rouse in her a feeling of anxiety” (*TTL* 97). Similarly, during a discussion of Andrew with her husband later in the evening, her thoughts almost immediately migrate to “the little paths on the edge of the cliffs” (*TTL* 107) where her son might face the literal danger of falling to his death. Her thoughts subtly foreshadow Andrew’s eventual death during the human construction of war,¹⁵ far from the unrealized dangers of the cliffs. His innocence and life are both taken not by the natural world, but, rather, by the destructive forces of human interests.

Just as Mrs. Ramsay seeks to protect her children and to preserve their innocence, she also wishes to extend the same protection to the innocence of Nature. She later worries over the destruction of untamed creatures, wondering “without shooting rabbits, how [is] one to keep them down?” (*TTL* 112). Bringing death to the “creature” that is “ruining her Evening Primroses” (*TTL* 112) connotes—in keeping with her role as protector and in contrast to her husband’s attitude—an uneasiness with the part of Nature that has not been cultivated or cannot be domesticated. Simply, even within her personae of Earth Mother, Mrs. Ramsay maintains an idealized notion of Nature that results in her struggle to accept its wild, unpredictable, and deadly qualities. This struggle to view these elements of the natural world—or human nature—can be read very easily as a Victorian quality as much as a maternal one. However, as a subtle but important distinction, while Mrs. Ramsay sees life as predatory—“quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance”—most of the life to which she refers exists outside of Nature, filled

¹⁵ Repeated in “Time Passes.”

with oppression created by humanity; its “sinister” quality, significantly, is created by the human concerns and social constructions of marriage, ambition, and poverty (*TTL* 96). Thus, while Mrs. Ramsay certainly hesitates to embrace the wilderness beyond the manicured hedge of the garden, she reserves her true lamentations for the *artificial* sorrows that permeate life.

Mr. Ramsay, however, perceives struggle as essential in defining man’s relationship to the *natural* world. Ironically, he views suffering both as a preferential element of life and as one necessary to a harmonious life:

He liked that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night, pitting muscle and brain against the waves and the wind; he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men were drowned, out there in a storm. (*TTL* 254)

Of course, he also nestles his preferred place for women snugly into this attitude. And while he clearly expresses a desire for women to remain in domestic, traditional Victorian roles, those roles exist primarily to enable men to achieve the status of “alpha male.” Cam, for example, sees this canine quality in her father during the boat trip to the Lighthouse even during the cerebral process of reading:

He read, she thought, as if he were guiding something, or wheedling a large flock of sheep, or pushing his way up and up a single narrow path; and sometimes he went fast and straight, and broke his way through the thicket, and sometimes it seemed a branch struck at him, a bramble blinded him, but he was not going to let himself be beaten by that; on he went, tossing page after page. (*TTL* 292-293)

Explicitly employing imagery of Nature, the passage aptly demonstrates Mr. Ramsay's singularity of focus and determination. Clearly, as he metaphorically battles through "thicket" and "bramble," Mr. Ramsay regards life, like the natural world, as filled with hostile challenges that must be met and defeated.

Much earlier in the novel, as Mr. Ramsay watches, perhaps enviously, his wife reading to their son James, he casually "pick[s] a leaf sharply from the hedge" (*TTL* 71). While seemingly insignificant, it is a motion indicative of a mind keenly aware of the limitations of life (an awareness that will later be seen in Cam), sensitive to life's restrictions and boundaries. For Mr. Ramsay, the moments of such awareness occur not simply during times of solitude but also during episodes in which feelings of isolation and personal irrelevancies overwhelm him. As he strolls toward the end of the yard, he contemplates his own level of greatness: When "[Mr. Ramsay] reached the edge of the lawn,...[he] looked out on the bay beneath" acknowledging "his fate to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away" (*TTL* 71-72). He distributes despair for both the limitations that he faces in life and the fate of the land within his portion of the "poor little universe" (*TTL* 110). Later—in a moment bordering on pathetic fallacy—after his wife raises no objection to their spending time apart, he laments "the land dwindling away, [noticing that] the island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up by the sea" (*TTL* 110). Just as the encroaching and continual motion of the sea threatens the stillness of the land, what he perceives as the movement of his wife away from him threatens his security. The scene illustrates the failed egocentric and masculine model of domination over Nature. It is unsurprising then that various critics have connected Mr. Ramsay's lamentation about the shrinking of his personal geography to the

disappearing British Empire. Within this connection, male authority dwindles in both the individual and the nation.

Although Mr. Ramsay is drawn to the “girls, with something flying, something a little wild and harum-scarum about them,” (*TTL* 154) he finds those untamed qualities attractive, like the sea, only insofar as they can ultimately be repressed at will. Thus, he often clings to the stable assurance of land, symbolically embodied in his wife, and, later, in Lily Briscoe. A conversation with her after Mrs. Ramsay’s death exposes arrogant insecurity manifested as an internalized trauma:

They both looked at the sea. Why, thought Mr. Ramsay, should she look at the sea when I am here? She hoped it would be calm enough for them to land at the Lighthouse, she said. The Lighthouse! The Lighthouse! What’s that got to do with it? he thought impatiently. (*TTL* 234)

Childishly, Mr. Ramsay expresses a feeling of being neglected by Lily Briscoe, in a way that is reminiscent of his demands for attention from Mrs. Ramsay. Instead of the Lighthouse, he feels that Lily should devote her attention to him. However, the focus of his jealousy also concerns the ubiquity of the sea, the maternal barrier to the Lighthouse. The unknowable, transient, and silent sea sends perpetual waves of reminders concerning his own inefficacies and hesitations; he has not yet established dominion or even begun the journey. Moreover, his need for masculine domination has been met by the encompassing femininity of the sea.

As individuals, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay each embody gender and familial identities very much characteristic of the Victorian era. Within the house, the roles that they enact similarly correspond to those identities but with noteworthy differences. The dinner party

scene toward the end of “The Window” section famously illustrates the type of conflicts as it demonstrates Mr. and Mrs. Ramsays’ polarized attitudes toward Nature. She sees the fruit bowl arrangement as a natural bounty of a mythological proportion and design:

[T]he grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a Trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus. (*TTL* 150-151)

Mrs. Ramsay sees the feast as a communal gift that Nature intends to be shared, as she acknowledges the abundance: “A whole French family could live on what an English cook throws away” (*TTL* 156-157). The food, literally, also as it fills the table, fills the space in between its occupants. Mrs. Ramsay, then, in keeping with her role of Earth Mother and Demeter, integrates her thoughts about sharing food with those of future marriages, which can be orchestrated like a dinner party. Mr. Ramsay, however, regards the scene as might a predatory animal or hunter guarding his prey, “scowl[ing]” when Augustus Carmichael asks for “another plate of soup” (*TTL* 148).

Toward the end of the novel, in “The Lighthouse” section, Lily Briscoe reflects back on the nature of the Ramsays’ relationship and recalls typical scenes that demonstrate much more ferocity than the dinner party. Mr. Ramsay’s attempts to assert spousal and patriarchal dominance periodically escalate to episodes in which the “whizzing” plates and “slamming” doors would be interrupted by “long rigid silences” (*TTL* 306). Lily Briscoe envisions Mr. Ramsay as “as the very figure of a famished wolfhound,” calling to his wife in an attempt to isolate her from the children whom she protects (*TTL* 307). However, assuming the powers afforded to her as a woman and

goddess of the household, “[s]he brooded and sat silent...tak[ing] care to be busy when he passed, evad[ing] him, and pretend[ing] not to see him” (*TTL* 307). Finally, Mrs. Ramsay relinquishes control and they retreat from the house—and, in turn, from adherence to the rules that govern it—and its inhabitants. Like a postlapsarian Adam and Eve longing for wisdom of Eden, the Ramsays surround themselves with Nature in an attempt to reach a resolution to a conflict representative of the type inherent within human relationships.¹⁶

...standing outside the group..., he would say her name, once only, for all the world like a wolf barking in the snow, but still she held back; and he would say it once more, and this time something in the tone would rouse her, and she would go to him, leaving [the children] all of the sudden, and they would walk off together among the pear trees, the cabbages, and the raspberry beds. They would have it out together. (*TTL* 307)

Significantly, their Eden consists of a domesticated Nature, a garden of orderly rows and beds, reminiscent of the construction of a house and the customs within it. This absence of wildness within it indicates that the domain belongs as much to Mrs. Ramsay as it does her husband, if not more. Indeed, because her emotional and attitudinal landscape harmonizes intimately with the natural world, Mrs. Ramsay may cite much of Nature as her own.¹⁷

¹⁶ Two other couples, Paul and Minta, and William Bankes and Lily Bricsoe, also make the journey. The latter's will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁷ In her essay “The Word Split Its Husk: Woolf's Double Vision of Modernist Language”, Bonnie Kime Scott notes that “Leonard Woolf titled the first volume of his autobiography *Sowing*, [adding that] although Virginia certainly enjoyed their garden,...composing *Between the Acts* there, Leonard was the more active gardener” (375).

Like her use of attitudes toward other aspects of Nature, Woolf uses the feminine or masculine qualities of animals to bridge or extend the polarities between the characters. As much as the forces of Nature and the physical landscape, Woolf employs animal motifs to shape the characters' identities and to transform human relationships within both *To the Lighthouse*. The novel devotes nearly as much textual space and contextual significance to animals as other aspects of the natural world. Indeed, much of the experimentation and the mastery of *To the Lighthouse* derive from Woolf's use of animal imagery and symbolism. And although the setting of the novel might seemingly lend itself to the inclusion of coastal dwelling and wild animals primarily, the variety of animals included in the text extends beyond merely those. Most important, Woolf creates associations with animals as a means of diminishing or extending psychological and emotional distances between characters. Additionally, like many other aspects of Nature in the novel, non-human animals represent the domesticated or dominating forces, often separated along lines of gender.

As an embodiment of Mother Nature, Mrs. Ramsay's associations appropriately extend to a myriad of animals. In the magnitude of this role, she transcends the identities of many classical representations of gods and goddess who maintain few or even only singular animal familiars. However, Mrs. Ramsay's connection to animals—much like her connection to the rest of Nature—can be read most clearly in terms of her relationship with her children. She acts as the guardian of the household and her children's needs, extending an almost identical emotional protection to the birds and rabbits outside of the house. Her worry about Jasper's shooting starlings recalls the worry that she feels regarding the killing of rabbits in the garden. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's concern for animals'

lives and her children's safety should not be read as mutually exclusive; preserving the lives of the animals also preserves the innocence of her children. Personifying the rooks through the assignment of the biblical names Joseph and Mary (*TTL* 126) helps accomplish this same goal. Jasper is certainly less likely to shoot a bird that he can call by name. To this end, she helps call her son into an experience of Nature that involves unity instead of divisiveness. As important, Mrs. Ramsay's naming the rooks is an action that further reflects her attitude toward Nature; it requires the protective nurturing that is best accomplished through domestication. Additionally, the naming also inserts a religious reference into a work in which religion—in any traditional sense—has been notably absent. It does so by linking the animal kingdom to religion in such a way that religious experience and expression are relegated to the safety and intellectual insignificance of a fairy tale.¹⁸ At the same time, by incorporating religious symbolism into the children's understanding of animals, Mrs. Ramsay uses tangible elements of the natural world to bridge the gulf between the children and a remote, divine father.

Unlike his wife's, Mr. Ramsay's animal identity is both more singular and more predatory, reflecting his attitude toward Nature as a force against which he must contend and which must be conquered. He takes on the personae of animals that seek to dominate and conquer their prey. Throughout the novel he is appropriately associated with wolves and dogs, sometimes even as a fluctuating version of each. Mrs. Ramsay, through her ability to domesticate, controls which canine appears. However, either canine association

¹⁸ Hussey quotes Hermione Lee's claim "that the [entire] novel 'continually hovers on the edge of becoming a fairy tale, or more ambitiously, a mythical or even Christian allegory... (128)'" (315). Given Woolf's use of the rooks in coordination with Christian symbolism, I maintain that Lee's claim borders on ambitious, although it is partially supported through the alignment of Prue's death and her child's birth with spring. More accurately, the novel blends pagan and Christian symbolism as a means of suffusing nature with religious experience.

may surface most visibly during social interactions in which he must—or feels he must—assert control. An episode during the dinner party, for example, particularly portrays the patriarch of the family asserting himself as the alpha male: “Mrs. Ramsay sees her husband’s ‘anger fly *like a pack of hounds*’ (emphasis added) when old Mr. Carmichael, who reminds her of ‘a cat watching birds’ in his brooding solitude, asks for more soup” (qtd. in Faris 110). Sharing his wife’s view of the impropriety and audacity of Mr. Carmichael’s request, Mr. Ramsay internally admonishes their guest. The scene suggests two natural enemies of the animal kingdom: Whereas Mr. Ramsay’s anger is associated with dogs whose hunt is communal, Mr. Carmichael’s request is linked with a more solitary feline action, apparent even in his “nocturnal reading habits” (Tremper 168). He considers his own needs, not the pack’s, creating a binary opposition between his character and Mrs. Ramsay’s.

Of course, Mr. Ramsay, “absorbed in himself” (*TTL* 76), *does* share much of Carmichael’s tendency toward solitude, but that tendency is modified by the “connubial union” (Wareham 167) with his wife. And while both characters certainly represent predators and “[t]he [inherent] isolation of the private consciousness [, those qualities are] exemplified by Augustus Carmichael, who lies silently in the sun with his stained moustache and cat’s eyes...” (Haring-Smith 149). Additionally, as a poet, Carmichael relies on the solitary world of intuition for the construction of his craft; like Mrs. Ramsay, he is “intuitively gifted...with qualities beyond those of a mere earthly being” (Lilienfeld 349). Mr. Ramsay, the philosopher, depends instead upon analytical skills, characterized by an objective and absolute immobility.

Just as her father looks at Nature as a force to subdue, Cam views it as a place to detach from boundaries. Surrounded by limitations, Cam's association with Nature suggests a longing for freedom, independence, and escape. As her mother calls to her, "she [flies] off like a bird...impelled by [an unknown] desire" (*TTL* 87) who will stop for neither her mother or father. Cam, the "wild villain" (*TTL* 87), seeks to immerse herself within a Nature that she sees in "a vision...on the far side of the [controlling boundaries of the] hedge" (*TTL* 87) beyond parental control. She reluctantly relinquishes her freedom to the maternal command and does so with a spirit of internal resistance. When she returns to her mother, she "[comes] lagging back, pulling a leaf by the way" (*TTL* 88), clutching a small piece of the wilderness that she sought but was denied. Able to escape only the edge of wilderness, Cam keeps the leaf as a reminder of her proximity to freedom.

Years later, during the journey to the Lighthouse, Cam extracts the memory of freedom denied and searches for it within the maternal sea. To be sure, the freedom that she seeks is as much psychological as physical. Shannon Forbes points to the scene in which "Cam dips her hand into the water" that "critics typically see...as evidence of Cam's suicidal fantasy" (473).¹⁹ However, the "suicide" can also represent Cam's desire

¹⁹ While Forbes acknowledges that the "wording suggests death imagery" (473), she sees the scene as Cam's connecting to the natural world synonymous with liberating her imagination:

It may be possible, then, to see this scene as illustrating Cam's mind...slowly regaining its independent tendency to form her own thoughts as they twist, turn, swirl in water and form patterns in her mind. In utilizing her mind in this creative way,...Cam recaptures the independent thoughts absent during the moments when she is forced or feels compelled to merely reiterate others' words verbatim. As Cam dips her hand in the water, as her mind indulges in imagination, she once again looks at this island, notes that it seems so small, and once again recovers her independent creativity as she [constructs a story of escape]. In doing so, Cam circles back to her mindframe on the lawn before Mrs. Ramsay truncates her creative, imaginative story, and regains, without interruption this time, her innate tendency to think her own creative thoughts and shape others' thoughts until they are her own. (474)

to escape from the vicarious experience of life, a longing to seek freedom from the restraints of consciousness and prescribed social roles. Discontent with mere *stories* of fishermen, Cam feels beckoned by the actual sea to reach into the world that the flounder calls home. Drowning a part of herself within that mysterious, primordial realm, she unlocks her own creative energy through the sensations she achieves through contact with the ocean. In order to know her own capabilities and her own essence, she must escape her mother, “the sailor” and develop “her [own] relation[ship] to the sea” (Lilienfeld 356). Nature becomes the bridge that allows her to cross from parental control to autonomous freedom. Ultimately, though, her escape from the mother fails, as her sympathies slowly envelope her father, despite the silent pleadings from her brother James. As she becomes under his sway, she quietly sounds the words that she learned from him: “[H]ow we [perish,] each alone.”

Because of her relatively brief appearance in the novel, Nancy is, perhaps, one of the most enigmatic of the Ramsay children. It is an identity fraught with an “elusive[ness]” common to many of the characters in the novel (Forbes 465). Like her sister Cam, she is drawn to Nature as a place that is alluring through its offer of escape from “the horror of family life” and the control that resonates within it (*TTL* 116). As such, as she retreats into the wilderness of shore, her parental loyalties diminish into irrelevancies. Kneeling down over the pools of water, conflicting identities mingle within her; she embraces the power “of God himself [over] millions of ignorant and innocent creatures,” assuming a role that is a macrocosm of her own “brooding” father (*TTL* 119).

However, Nancy soothes anxiety of identity while simultaneously claiming personal meaning by embracing the opportunity for uninhibited performance (Forbes 465). She “wade[s] out to *her own rocks* and searched *her own pools* (emphasis added) and let[s] that couple look after themselves” (*TTL* 118). Freeing herself from the control of the father and facing the maternal powers of the sea alone, Nancy, like her father and mother, exerts an effort to control its destructive force (*TTL* 118-119), recognizing that to do so is to become one with it. Moreover, to establish such a union, Nancy journeys through what Haring-Smith clarifies as the “unknowable core of darkness” of the private consciousness (149) much like the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” of her mother (*TTL* 62). Much like her mother’s silent embracing of the lighthouse beam, she emerges then into a wordless, incommunicable experience of Nature that hypnotically immobilizes her. In her attempt to escape the power of the father and the restrictions of the mother, Nancy, through the bridge of Nature, gains the perspective of both. Having transformed into a “fish in a stream...who cannot describe the stream,” the “consciousness of other groups” (*MOB* 80) has dissipated into insignificance. And unlike Cam, Nancy does not fall under its sway again.

As the longest section of the novel, the opening and aptly named “Window” section of the novel devotes significant space to the dichotomies within the Ramsay family. The section introduces and develops the conflicts between husband and wife and parent and child that populate the remainder of the novel. Against the landscape of the island, the sea, and the garden, the conflicts that develop within the home are often partially resolved through the influence of Nature. However, as the lingering image of The Lighthouse sends constant reminders, the human ego clings to the conflicts. In order

for the family to endure loss and separation and to resolve their conflicts, they must reach the Lighthouse. Before that can happen, though, the home must be cleared of the dualities inherent within human concerns and cleansed by both time and Nature. In the next part of this chapter, I will examine the extent to which this happens in “Time Passes.”

Traditionally, many critics have viewed the middle “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* as the bridge between “The Window” in which human conflicts flourish and “The Lighthouse” in which they are resolved. Importantly, “Time Passes” effectively functions as that bridge because of the absence of the human ego within it. And in the place of egoism, we find a proliferation of Nature unparalleled in any other part of the novel.²⁰ The relationships between the remaining Ramsays become more fully realized, and Lily—as will be discussed further in the next chapter—finds insight through her ability to create.

In “Time Passes,” a question appears in correlation with Mrs. McNab’s assessment of the state of their home’s physical condition: “What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?” (*TTL* 213). The response comes in the form of the observation of the “Lighthouse beam”:

...[It] entered the rooms for a room for a moment, sent its sudden stare over the bed and wall in the darkness of winter, looked with equanimity at the thistle and the swallow, therat and the straw. Nothing now withstood them; nothing said no to them. Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the armchairs.

²⁰ Many critics such as Gillian Beer and Marianne DeKoven metaphorically link the ravages of the natural world to those occurring as a result of the human motivations and technology of World War I.

Let the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries. (*TTL* 214)

With the absence of human influence, the house has transformed into a product of Nature's "will." The wilderness has obscured and even delineated what remains of domesticity. Near the beginning of the same section, a notable passage reveals the impact of the indifferent, impersonal quality of Nature. Appearing alongside the indication of Mrs. Ramsay's death, it clarifies that the natural world exists with an order independent of human construction:

The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and should any sleeper find that he might find on the beach an answer for his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world the compass of the soul....Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer. (*TTL* 199)

Nature's indifference to humanity's concerns appears again as "spring without a leaf to toss" but also characterized with distinctly human qualities: "bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity...laid out on her fields wide-eyed and watchful and entirely careless of what was done or thought by the beholders" (*TTL* 204). In a much gentler depiction, spring is characterized as "softened and acquiescent...with

her bees humming and gnats dancing..." (*TTL* 205). She "threw her cloak about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have *taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind* [emphasis mine] (*TTL* 205).²¹ In this respect, Nature provides comfort in times of sorrow. Prue Ramsay's textual proximity to the season best illustrates this idea. Through her death during childbirth, Prue's identity, like spring's and her mother's, reads as inherently sacrificial and temporal. Indeed, her death giving birth connects deeply and directly to the natural cycle of birth-death-birth. As her life ends, new life emerges. Absorbed into its cyclicity, she has merged into the life-affirming process of Nature that necessitates death:

The wave of life flings itself out indefatigably. It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, Nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer; heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag ourselves about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out. ("On Being Ill," 16)

Unlike Prue, Mrs. Ramsay lives through the birth of eight children. However, sacrifice is manifested in her devotion to her children, a sacrifice—through the surrendering of her ego—that connects her both to her children and the cyclicity of Nature. Thus, she transcends the need for the domestication of Nature, becoming a symbol of "the fruitfulness of earth" (Fleishman 111) that persists despite human attempts to transform it.

Finally, both directly and indirectly, Nature transforms each of the family members to the extent that their identities are shaped by that interaction. Even more

²¹ See note 3

important, through the illumination that Nature provides about the characters, the reader receives the ability to more completely understand the psychological and mythological identity of those characters and the extent to which those identities affect their relationships with each other. For the Ramsay children, parental loyalties form and strengthen (and, conversely, dissolve and weaken) through shared understanding and experiences of Nature. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, however, do not harbor or exhibit overtly opposite attitudes toward Nature. While Mrs. Ramsay's seemingly innocuous belief that Nature is best preserved and most freely flourishes through cultivation may rightly read as more nurturing than her husband's will to power over it, both individuals ultimately wish to alter it. Thus, although often strained, a union persists between the Ramsays, formed from their shared understanding of the natural world and their places within it. The dichotomies created through attachments to personal interests wane and are ultimately bridged by the cohesive power of Nature; the passage of time ultimately reveals that power.

CHAPTER 3
THE SCIENTIFIC VISION AND ARTISITIC SUBJECTIVITY OF NATURE:
LILY BRISCOE’S AND WILLIAM BANKES’ COMMUNION WITH NATURE
AND ONE ANOTHER

“Teaching and preaching is beyond human power” (Lily Briscoe, To the Lighthouse).

One of the most seemingly unlikely relationships in *To the Lighthouse* develops between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. A major character in the novel, Lily Briscoe’s textual and contextual saturation of the novel easily overshadows William Bankes’. Moreover, as an artist, Lily Briscoe experiences Nature through the fluctuating subjectivity of her vision, ultimately as it manifests itself through the form of her painting. To the botanist William Bankes, though, Nature most clearly appears as the equivalent of a mathematical formula to be solved and understood by means of rational objectivism. Despite their different methods of connecting to the natural world, however, their relationship still develops primarily through the mediation of Nature. This chapter will demonstrate that, much like Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, they symbolize a fusion of opposing forces, attitudes, and even identities. As the Ramsays arguably represent a typical Victorian era couple, they certainly manifest differences and suffer through conflicts impacted by that status, especially in areas concerning gender. Those polarities surface in their attitudes toward Nature, many of which Lily Briscoe and William Bankes mirror. However, in many ways, their union consists of even more prominent and complicated dichotomies than the Ramsays’. Both characters, I will argue, manipulate

Nature through their individual fields, Lily Briscoe by cultivating her canvas and William Banks by classifying and organizing plants. Further, both characters engage with and demonstrate attitudes about their fields that may be argued as often belonging to the other's: Lily seeks balance and structured order within her art while William expresses a subtle appreciation for aesthetic beauty. By doing so, they successfully bridge the dichotomy between the inherent subjectivity of art and the required objectivity of science. Through the connection that they create, the couple can be seen as representative of a new generation attempting to find a solution to the previous failed models of relationships to the natural world.

In her essay "*To the Lighthouse* and Painting," Susan Yunis points to Lily Briscoe's "artistic impulse to order the world," correctly asserting that it is "in some ways the central act of the text..." (134). To this point, numerous critics including Mark Hussey and Jane Fisher have pointed to the formalist similarities between the Woolf's construction of the novel and Lily's structuring of her painting. Paul Goring, for example, makes the following observation:

Within the narrative...and yet at the same time running parallel to it, is the creation of Lily Briscoe's painting. As Lily draws the final stroke on her canvas, Virginia Woolf similarly completes the narrative...The reader is positioned to conceive of the novel in terms of the painting, and thus to 'see' its elements in functioning in the same formal way as those in the painting. (222)

However, to clarify Yunis's assertion as it relates to my own argument, I will demonstrate how both Lily's art and the creative process contain ample thematic importance, as well. To do so, I will first demonstrate how Lily's "impulse" to create and

the “central[ized] act” of her artistic expression closely mirror Mrs. Ramsay’s attitude toward Nature and her maternal engagement with it.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mrs. Ramsay seeks to control Nature through the process of domestication. Childless and unmarried, Lily Briscoe lacks a family or home of her own. From a mythological perspective, she can be read as Persephone to the Demeter of Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, while she creates through her art, Lily is neither able to assume the role of Earth Mother nor able to exercise the depth of control over the natural world in the same capacity as Mrs. Ramsay. While Mrs. Ramsay may be easily compared to the mother hen to whom others—inside and outside of her family—flock, Lily likens herself to a solitary “bird chirp[ing] in the garden, gathering a desperate courage she [would need to] urge her own exemption from the universal law” (*TTL* 81). To compensate for her lack of familial attachments (her father barely receives mention), she bravely and instinctively turns to the world of art. Theresa Crater links Lily Briscoe’s attraction to the world of art to Mr. Ramsay as a representative of the Law of the Father, noting that art gives her the opportunity to live outside of this law (125). Through the assumption of an identity unencumbered by familial associations, she gains the opportunity to design the world she sees outside to match the ideas and emotions that circulate within her. It is also through art that she accesses Nature, although often not in the traditional or classical methods. In his “Essay on Aesthetics,” Roger Fry presents “the idea that art is an expression of the imaginative life; it aims not at imitation of nature, but at creation” (qtd. in Whitworth, 111). In both of these senses, Lily domesticates the natural world and the cycle of life, just as Mrs. Ramsay does. But through her art, Lily also connects to the maternity of Mrs. Ramsay through her own ability to create.

An examination of Lily Briscoe's art and its correlation to Mrs. Ramsay's domestication of Nature must take into consideration both the creation of art and the product of that creation, the physical artifact of the painting itself. Mrs. Ramsay's art, in contrast, does not involve the artificial medium of Lily's. However, she does express desires for the beauty of the fruit bowl and the innocence of the children to remain untouched. Lily, similarly, selects those things that are filled with life and mobility to immortalize on her canvas (Goring 225). From the living, sensory rich spectrum she ponders "how to connect this *mass* on the right hand with that on the left" (*TTL* 86, emphasis added). The problem "is resolved in the language of logical relations" (Banfield 503). However, she stays mindful "that by [connecting the masses] the unity of the whole might be broken" (*TTL* 86). For Lily, the unity she seeks to maintain reflects harmony with humanity and Nature, a harmony achieved partially through art that she also relevantly associates with private communication between women:

...for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought....(*TTL* 83)

It is with a marked intentionality, then, that Lily selects the objects like the tree and the hedge that populate the natural world, firmly and permanently placing them onto her canvas. She contemplates "bringing the line of the branch across so" as a way of transforming the tree to coordinate with her vision (*TTL* 86). However, she avoids reaching for the utter control of completely uprooting the tree, choosing instead the more domestic action of moving a portion of it. In this way, Lily, like Mrs. Ramsay, domesticates the tree in a way that prevents it from growing into an unruly state. At the

same time, she creates new forms without including the destruction of old ones. Interestingly, as she determines how to construct her painting, she associates James Ramsay with Nature, implicitly comparing his stiffness and immobility to that of the tree. In this sense, Lily embraces James more completely through natural, maternal, and artistic understandings.

In comparison to Lily's artistic process, as the archetypal Earth Mother of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay naturally, albeit more symbolically, manipulates Nature more thoroughly and in a way that ensures more notability and longevity. Through her association with the continuity of the garden, the union of marriage, and, consequently, the perpetuation of life, Mrs. Ramsay's *identity* domesticates life as much as Lily's *actions* do. One notable exception to this argument discussed in the previous chapter concerning Mrs. Ramsay's draping of the pig's skull still involves decorating a natural—although lifeless—creation, not the “plastic medium” that Lily adorns. One can easily imagine that Lily Briscoe might also look to the skull as a stark medium—like her canvas—that can be brought to life through her own creative energies. In contrast, William Bankes might well approach it scientifically, to be examined as a lab or field specimen.

Like the shadows produced by the pig's skull, the shadows that Lily Briscoe creates in her painting result from her attempt to recreate what she (subjectively) envisions in Nature while maintaining the “essence” of the objective reality. Like Mrs. Ramsay, she circumvents the dichotomy by implementing both object and essence in her work. In this regard, her shadows help create art that incorporates both structured objectivity and interpretative subjectivity, favoring neither mode of understanding.

As significant as the substantive and methodical choices that Lily Briscoe makes in her art is her decision about where to paint. In both “The Window” at the beginning of the novel and ten years later during the final “Lighthouse” section of the novel, she sets up her easel in relatively the same area of the Ramsasys’ lawn. As Goring emphasizes, Lily Briscoe paints on the “*edge* of the lawn,” drawing attention to this physical proximity as a means of illustrating her marginalized place within the social and familial setting (224). However, the location at which she paints can also be seen in relation to her assimilation of Nature. Just as Lily negotiates the polarities between objectivity and subjectivity in her painting, her place within the natural world approximates a position that straddles the domesticity of the home and the wilderness beyond the hedge.²² In this sense, through the vehicle of her art, she is poised to pass judgment on either world; essentially, representing both in her painting as her vision draws almost equally from each. To do so, she includes both the tree and the hedge, two of the most prominent natural objects in the vicinity. However, most of her creative energies focus on the hedge and the symbolism within it.

Like her painting itself, the ubiquitous hedge that she inserts in it contains elements of both the wilderness and domesticated Nature. While a product of the natural world, the hedge and its shape—like rows of flowers in the garden—are created and maintained by human hands. In those terms, Lily Briscoe imposes it on her painting as a symbol of the blended domesticity and wilderness she attempts to portray on her canvas. Even within the artificially manicured shape that defines it, the hedge “with its green

²² Carol H. Cantrell offers a slightly different perspective of “place,” differentiating it from “landscape[s] or “wilderness” by claiming that “place” [necessitates an inclusion of] “the human presence.” Cantrell further claims “‘place’ is where our embodied selves experience the world, and through which we receive the source of energy and nurturance which keep us alive and in which our activities make themselves felt most immediately” (34).

cave of blues and browns” contains a gateway to the mysterious wilderness (*TTL* 243). Toward the end of the novel, just before she fully attains her vision, she asks herself what “the hedge mean[s] to her, what...the garden mean[s] to her, what...it mean[s] to her when a wave [breaks]” (*TTL* 304). She does not answer her own question verbally or even consciously, instead returning to her painting to realize a response. There—in the painting—she contrasts the domesticated immobility of the hedge by succumbing to the “curious physical sensation” (*TTL* 244) that leads her past domestication into spontaneous creation that moves with and simulates the “fluidity” of the maternal sea:

[The brush] was now heavier and went slower as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was 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. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality....(*TTL* 246)

At this moment, the “outer things” are replaced by a journey inward that results in a deep connection to Nature. Her physical and cognitive movement act in symbiosis with the natural sensations around her. Lily Briscoe, then, is able to alter the hedge and “move the tree to the middle” because she allows “her mind [to] ris[e] and [fall] with the sea,” ultimately to “[lose] herself” and submerge into it (*TTL* 228, 231).²³ However, even within the protection of the hedge, the creeping wilderness twice threatens the balance that Lily Briscoe seeks in her painting. Early in the novel, it first storms into her in the form of Mr. Ramsay as “he almost knock[s] her easel over coming down upon her with

²³ Citing Woolf’s essay, “Reading,” Charlotte Zoe Walker references Woolf’s “speak[ing]...of the sensuous pleasures of reading in a natural setting and the pleasures of the mind in ranging between book and landscape...” (151). While Walker makes note of the Mrs. Ramsay’s reading, Walker’s reference is applicable to Lily, also, with a the book replaced by her easel and paintbrushes.

his hands waving, shouting out ‘Boldly we rode and well...’” (*TTL* 32). The second time, appearing propelled by a force as strong as the one that drives her father, the “wild villain, Cam, dashing past...graze[s] the easel by an inch” (*TTL* 87).²⁴ Contending against the forces of the wilderness that throw her off “that razor edge of balance,” can be likened to her battle against the “law of the father” that does much the same.

Finally, Lily Briscoe gains a perspective of Nature unique to her as an artist. By blending the objectivity of form into the subjectivity of experience, she draws from both the masculine and the feminine. In doing so, she creates art that transcends gender. It is her art that also allows her to bridge the psychological distance between her and Mrs. Ramsay. Maternally, Lily both creates and domesticates. She does so simultaneously, as her domestication, like Mrs. Ramsay’s, is also a form of creation. Although as Persephone she does not achieve the providence over the Earth that Mrs. Ramsay as Demeter maintains, through her own creation she escapes her own underworld of marginalization to achieve insight and power of her own.

Like Lily Briscoe, William Banks initially seems to experience Nature through neatly defined parameters. As a botanist, he connects to Nature through an objective understanding of it, an understanding not dependent upon—and even impeded by—emotion. He exists through the sorting and classification of plants, connecting to them through a scientific detachment. As such, he instinctively approaches life and Nature in a manner that closely resembles a field study. When he sees Mrs. Ramsay reading the fairy tale to James, for example, he views the bonding between mother and child as a process

²⁴ Notably, as referenced in the last chapter, Cam eventually subsides to Mr. Ramsay’s need for attention. When she reaches adolescence, she does not grow apart from her father or rebel against him. Instead she grows *into* him, bowing to his demands. Essentially, Mr. Ramsay tames the “wild villain” to the point that she resides under his command.

synonymous with “prov[ing] something absolute about the digestive system of plants.” While seemingly unrelated, the two acts both result in William Bankes’ “tam[ing] the “barbarity” of nature and “subdu[ing]...the reign of chaos” (*TTL* 77).²⁵ Even as he parenthetically considers the classical beauty of Mrs. Ramsay, he shifts his attention to the exact time and location of the train that he plans to take:

(‘Nature has but little clay...like that of which moulded you.’ He saw her at the end of the line, Greek, blue-eyed, straight nosed. How incongruous it seemed to be telephoning to a woman like that. The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face. Yes, he would catch the 10.30 at Euston...) (*TTL* 50)

In a moment bordering on humorous, he fails to notice the irony of his citing the “incongru[ity]” of speaking “to a woman like [Mrs. Ramsay]” on the telephone. He, of course, psychologically distances himself from Mrs. Ramsay—or, at least, from her beauty—when he divides his thoughts between her and the precision and locality of the train’s arrival. Indeed, William Bankes might possibly regard the timeliness and predictability of the train as beautiful, also.

Similarly, William Bankes’ attraction to Lily’s painting emanates from his perception that her vision of Nature coincides with a scientific understanding of it. Whereas much of Lily’s artistry utilizes blended, almost indefinable colors representative of private emotion, William recognizes her painting as resulting predominately from the artist’s attention to detailed lines, specific colors, and proportional space. He examines it “with his glasses raised to the scientific examination of her canvas” (*TTL* 85-86). Of

²⁵ Ten years later, Lily Briscoe similarly considers her paint brush as “the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos,” particularly as it is a tool that can create order from such a world (*TTL* 232).

course, the painting itself contains both emotional and logical components; it is his perception of Lily Briscoe's painting that reveals his attitude toward Nature as much as his attitude toward art. While "[h]e was interested....[and] took it in scientifically in good faith..., [he conceded that] all his prejudices were on the other side..." (TTL 85).

Fittingly, the art that he owns correlates both his attitudes and his interaction with art and Nature. To further explain the "prejudices," he describes to Lily a painting in his house:

The largest picture in his drawing-room, which painters had praised, and valued at a higher price than he had given for it, was of the cherry trees in blossom on the banks of the Kennet. He had spent his honeymoon on the banks of the Kennet.

(TTL 85)

It is a statement containing an odd and revealing mixture of wistful sentimentality and comforting pragmatism, neatly capturing much of William Bankes' character. Learning of his painting's monetary value from artists, he receives measurable validation for the objective portion of the worth that he attaches to it. However, he likely finds deeper value from the (presumably) purely representational quality of the painting. Capturing the cherry blossoms as they are in bloom, it sustains an idealized, untarnished, and classical beauty that is reminiscent of his description of Mrs. Ramsay's beauty.²⁶ In much the same way, the painting gives the widower William Bankes easy access to the memory of his wife; the exactness of the art does not require—nor, perhaps, allow—subjective interpretation. Its photographic image safely and almost effortlessly guides William Bankes' imagination to what he likely perceives as the purest and most ideal time in his marriage. Like Lily Briscoe, though, he neither has children nor is able to establish

²⁶ In a chapter section entitled "Representation and Aesthetics: *To the Lighthouse*," Michael Whitworth clarifies that "[t]he definite article is important here, as is the specificity of the name: not *any* cherry trees by *any* river, but *those* particular ones" (emphasis added, 110).

relationships with the Ramsay children. Cam, for example, thwarts William Bankes' effort to achieve an experience of domesticity, as well. She defies the orders of the "nursemaid" to give "give a flower to the gentleman" (*TTL* 38), denying William Bankes the opportunity to enjoy the Sweet Alice as a purely sensory pleasure instead of a cerebral one associated with a microscopic examination of it.

Heidi Stalla provides convincing evidence that Woolf at least partially based the fictional William Bankes on a 19th century English explorer of the same name. The historical William Bankes "had one of the largest collections of Egyptian antiquities in England" and also owned a substantial "collection of European paintings [that contained]...paintings by Titian, Tintoretto, Giorgione and Rubens" (24, 25). In order to maintain focus on the natural world, Woolf transforms William Bankes into a botanist, a collector of the elements of Nature. However, as illustrated above, Woolf ably combines each Bankes into the novel, especially in regard to his relationship with Lily Briscoe.

Although Lily Briscoe's and William Bankes' individual pursuits and interests might appear to create impenetrable qualities that cannot be compared, their relationship briefly flourishes through the mediation of the natural world. Simply, the differences that exist between the worlds of art and science disappear as they shed their identities of painter and botanist to embrace the impersonal universality of Nature. Lily pictures the love within the Ramsays' marriage and family as a symbol of unity with Nature, complete with its most tumultuous and repetitious qualities:

The sky stuck to them; the birds sang to them. And what was even more exciting, she felt too, as she saw Mr. Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree

bending, how life made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one became curled and while like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there with a dash on the beach. (*TTL* 76)

So, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes find unity and understanding when they retreat beyond the hedge further into the natural world. It is there that they transcend identities that are necessitated by interaction with the Ramsays and the other guests. The movement is a natural one for Lily and William, as both already have residences outside the Ramsay home. The movement away from the home also allows Lily and William to escape the influence of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and for Nature to more completely mediate their relationship. Again, both partially surrender the artificial as they move into the natural world. Lily demonstrates this by placing “her brushes neatly in a box, side by side” as she comments to William about “the sun giv[ing] less heat” (*TTL* 35). Instantly, she integrates a deliberate yet subconscious guided *portrayal* of the natural world’s sensory elements on canvas with a cognitive *understanding* of them:

Looking about her, [Lily] saw that it was bright enough, the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue. But something moved, flashed, and turned silver in the air. It was September after all, the middle of September, and past six in the evening. (*TTL* 35)

In William Bankes’ presence, she ably balances her awareness of Nature between an artistic, subjective appreciation of it and a more objective consciousness that also associates Nature’s sights and sounds with the progression of the calendar and the clock.

Lily Briscoe and William Bankes then wordlessly begin their journey to the sea in which the images of Nature support the silence that they share, alleviating awkwardness or even need for conversation.²⁷ However, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes' shared experience of Nature does not necessitate verbal communication, something that Lily Briscoe recognizes: "Mr. Bankes made it entirely unnecessary for her to speak by his rapture" (*TTL* 76). They then pursue a path that has a regularity suggesting a connection to both each other and the elements around them:

So off they strolled down the garden in the usual direction, past the tennis lawn, past the pampas grass, to that break in the thick hedge, guarded by red-hot poker like brasiers of clear burning coal, between which the blue waters of the bay looked bluer than ever. (*TTL* 35)

The narration gives no practical reason for their journey, only indicating that "[t]hey came there regularly every evening drawn by some need" (*TTL* 36). Beyond the more general "natural instinct" to immerse themselves within Nature, each is drawn specifically away from the sterility of the land to the maternal, life-giving power, energy, and comfort of the sea:

It was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief. First, the 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

²⁷ In "Private and Public Consciousness," Haring-Smith, like many Woolf scholars, argues that "the private consciousness dominates *To the Lighthouse*." Further, she indicates that "[m]ost of the characters' thoughts are pre-verbal, highly personal and not so easily communicated to others" (148).

delight when it came, a fountain of white water; and then, while one waited for that, one watched, on the pale semicircular beach, wave after wave shedding again and again smoothly a film of mother-of-pearl. (*TTL* 36)

In the passage above, the vitality and unpredictability of the sea literally depicts the untamed aspect of Nature outside the boundaries of the household and garden. I propose that within this wilderness, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes both temporarily escape the restraints and limitations of a domesticated world and even their own desires to tame or control the natural elements. In doing so, they face the roughness of the water, allowing their bodies and consciousness to “expand” with it, to “set sail” with it, and, ultimately, to merge with it. It is then, through this shared experience of the natural world, that they not only become one with Nature, but, for the moment, consequently become one with each other. The scene is reminiscent of Mrs. Ramsay’s own merging with the beam of the Lighthouse, when she silently declares “It is enough.” But unlike the *shared* silence of Lily Briscoe and William Bankes, the silence that passes between the Ramsays often creates separation rather than unity: “He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she could look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her” (*The Window*, Chapter XII).

For both Lily Briscoe and William Bankes, the enjoyment of the motion filled and life-giving, maternal sea is supplanted by “some sadness” felt through viewing the finality and lifeless continuity of the dunes (*TTL* 36-37). While the water and waves of the sea quickly and vigorously awaken their senses, the image of the dunes deadens them. The union, then, that is established through a “common hilarity” and an “excite[ment about] the moving waves” (*TTL* 36) is quickly replaced by a separation, indicated by

both characters turning inward to their individual modes of contemplation. Lily Briscoe laments over the reality that the “distant views seem to outlast by a million years ... the gazer” (*TTL* 36-37). The private revelation about Nature foreshadows a later thought addressing the impermanence of self compared to the useless immortality of her art:

She looked at her picture ‘You’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words; not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. (*TTL* 276)

For William Banks, the sight of the dunes conjures thoughts of his faded friendship with Mr. Ramsay. Although he stands next to Lily Briscoe, engaged in a friendship with her, he still regards the scene with a feeling of loss. Without bitterness, he quietly accepts Mr. Ramsay’s need for a domestic life as the reason for the death of their friendship, he relates in his “dumb colloquy with the sand dunes”:

[It]was suddenly interrupted, William Banks remembered...by a hen straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks, upon which Ramsay, stooping, pointed his stick and said ‘Pretty—pretty....’ [I]t seemed to him that their friendship had ceased there on that stretch of road. After that, Ramsay had married. After that, what with one thing and another, the pulp had gone out of their friendship....[T]here ...was his friendship, in its acuteness and reality laid up across the bay among the sandhills. (*TTL* 37-38)

Against a backdrop of Nature’s permanency, both Lily Briscoe and William Banks privately engage thoughts of the instability and unreliability of human relationships.

While Nature unites them, these thoughts of loss and impermanence separate them, driving them into their private psyches.

Both Lily Briscoe's and William Bankes' perspective of the dunes differ distinctly from Mrs. Ramsay's earlier assessment of them and the way in which she experiences them. As she walks with Charles Tansley, barely listening to the "ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly," she instinctively turns from his decidedly artificial words to the "soft low pleats [of] the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seem to be running away..." (*TTL* 24-25). Her eye is not drawn to the lifeless sand as much as it is to the moving and growing grasses that populate it. As a creator of life, she focuses on the features of the dunes that change, that move, and that grow. Lily Briscoe and William Bankes move from a silent and shared experience of joyful life created by the sea,²⁸ but Mrs. Ramsay becomes burdened by what she perceives as meaningless human conversation, choosing instead to devote her attention to the life that grows in the sand.

In the final "Lighthouse" section of the novel, Lily Briscoe comes to a moment of revelation that fittingly occurs in coordination with the Ramsays' movement across the sea in a boat, in an effort to reach The Lighthouse. Reflecting over the numerous times that Mrs. Ramsay created unity within her family, Lily experiences an epiphany regarding the symbiotic nature of life. She awakens to an understanding of the role that Mrs. Ramsay's orchestration played in establishing and maintaining meaning and unified order. However, connected to that awakening is the emerging awareness that through her

²⁸ Charlotte Zoe Walker astutely argues that "Woolf interpolates lyrical suggestions of the cycle of life of nature into the sequence of her narrative. Often these are expressed through the imagery of silence, where silence mediates between the self and nature" (145). Nature, in turn, I maintain, mediates the relationships between individuals.

own painting Lily herself does the same thing: “‘Like a work of art’, she repeated, looking from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again” (*TTL* 249). Then, as the most convincing proponent of this revelation, she sees Nature affirm it through its actions:

Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was stuck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said She owed this revelation to her. (*TTL* 249-250)

However, Lily Briscoe also owes much of her revelation to William Bankes. She extracts memories from their annual summer “stroll[s] through the courtyards,” in which they share an appreciation for “the proportions and the flowers” (*TTL* 272). During those times, William Bankes tell[s] her things about perspective [and] architecture” that will surface in the “intensity” of her vision (*TTL* 272, 320). But, he does more than simply impart knowledge. William Bankes, “a man who spent too much time in laboratories,” (*TTL* 272) teaches Lily Briscoe how to “stop to look at a tree, or the view over the lake, and admire a child” so that the hazy formality of her painting clearly captures a moment for her as an artist. As Charlotte Walker succinctly states, “[f]or Woolf, nature encompasses infinity and the infinitely small, inhabits both science and poetry” (147). It, of course, inhabits art, as well. Quite fittingly, then, with simplicity and beauty, Virginia Woolf harmoniously bridges the dichotomy of realities through the scientist William

Bankes as he allows the artist Lily Briscoe the opportunity to witness him “[walk] slowly...with his head thrown back, [and] merely breathe the air” (*TTL* 272).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

“[C]ertainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being)

In “Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” Martin Corner begins with the simple yet provocative claim that “Virginia Woolf was an atheist; she was also a mystic” (43). Like Corner, I find that Woolf’s lack of belief in a personal god does not diminish her mysticism. To the contrary, the mysticism to which Woolf adheres flourishes due to her lack of association with orthodox spirituality and her use of Nature as its substitute. That exchange appears in manifestations throughout *To the Lighthouse*, ultimately functioning as a means of bridging the personal gulfs between the characters in it. As evidence, during several episodes of the novel, Nature appears as divine both independently and through the characters’ experiences of it; solitary immersion in the impersonality of Nature often permits sensory experiences of “divine goodness” (*TTL* 127, 128) to satiate the character without the impediment of custom, judgment, or even the confining rigidity of speech. In those instances it replaces all of those, creating bonds with humanity that comfort because of its indifference, not despite it. The connections that exist between Nature and the Ramsays—particularly Mrs. Ramsay and her daughters, Cam and Nancy—emerge because Nature circulates within them. A passage in “Time Passes” reveals this essential truth:

As summer neared, as evenings lengthened, there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind—of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. (*TTL* 204)

In relation to the passage above, *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates Nature's impersonality can function as an alternative to the inclusion of a personal God. For Virginia Woolf, then, turning to the impersonality of Nature allows her to reject the ultimate expression of "I" that she seeks to absolve from her writing. Moreover, by embracing Nature within her writing, she escapes the polarizing limitations of the utter masculinity of a traditional representation of God. As Charlotte Walker similarly observes, "Nature was for [Woolf] an intense and crucial interlocutor in the questionings about ... patriarchy and gender, and spirituality and the rejection of traditional religion that are at the heart of her literary achievement" (144).

Woolf carefully selects a passage from a fairy tale to insert within *To the Lighthouse* in order to demonstrate Nature's equality to more traditional representations of divinity. As Mrs. Ramsay reads to the children, they listen to the description of a "raging" storm with "black waves as high as church towers and mountains" (*TTL* 97). The coupling of the religious and natural imagery through the fairy tale shows Woolf subtly and briefly connecting Nature to the divine. In the scene, it is important that the waves do not lap over the church towers nor do the mountains rise above them. The impersonal divinity of Nature garners as much attention and displays as much strength as humanity's artifacts of homage toward its personal God. In this regard, Woolf presents

Nature as a choice that is as relevant or credible in its divinity as any traditional representation of the divine. It is a choice that permits detaching from egoism and from patriarchy. Pointing to the “spiritual roots” of Woolf’s environmental holism, Bonnie Kime Scott also notes a less ethereal function of Woolf’s attitude toward nature: “Holism might be seen as a way to break free of the patrolling and enforcing of geographical, scientific, and environmental boundaries” (109). Instead of using the experience of Nature to bridge the gap between God and humanity, Woolf allows her characters to embrace Nature as a viable and even preferable alternative to God. In this respect, Woolf draws more upon elements of Romanticism than Modernism.

In many ways, the Lighthouse exists as a power in the novel parallel to that of Nature. As the “central, androgynous symbol” (Wareham 167) of the novel, the Lighthouse is not directly associated with Nature; it does, however, function in coordination with Nature while alternately offering protection from it. Further, its continual presence—both physical and psychological—and luminary power dominate the novel and the Ramsays’ minds with as much veracity as the sea which surrounds and batters against it. Attempts to define the meaning of the Lighthouse, though, have not resulted in a unified, critical consensus. I propose that the Lighthouse—including the journey to it—exists alongside Nature as a means of revealing the spiritual attitudes of the novel’s characters.²⁹

²⁹ Mark Hussey proposes that “the most rigid interpretation of the lighthouse is that given by F. L. Overcarsch, who holds that the novel ‘is based principally on the Bible,’” noting that Overcarsch “argues that the trip to the lighthouse symbolizes the ascension to heaven” (314). I agree with Hussey’s assessment regarding the rigidity of Overcarsch’s argument and will differentiate between his view of the journey and mine.

While several critical voices like Wareham's correctly contend that the Lighthouse towers as a beacon of gender neutrality,³⁰ I see the beam of the Lighthouse most accurately read as feminine. Mrs. Ramsay sees its waves of light transform the masculinity and stability of the land into a wavering "moon country, uninhabited of men" (*TTL* 25). She turns to the transformative clarity of the beam after she "rejects 'the hands of the Lord'" (Corner 47). However, Mrs. Ramsay embraces both the beam and the Lighthouse itself. In one instance, she sees the Lighthouse as a dangerous, desolate, and monotonous wilderness, imagining life within it:

[T]o see the same the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not being able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? (*TTL* 14).

At other times, she romanticizes it, exclaiming in pleasure at the beauty of "the plateful of blue water ...before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst..." (*TTL* 25). Through the Lighthouse, she gains the ability to fully embrace the duality of Nature. And unlike her husband and two of her children, she does so without the need to take the physical journey to it.

Toward the end of the novel, when the boat finally reaches the Lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay confronts the towering nemesis that has haunted him for years. Bearing the packages that his daughter Nancy prepared for the Lighthouse keepers³¹, he "[rises] and [stands] in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world,...as if he [is]

³⁰ Hussey cites Herbert Marder's view that "[t]he 'masculine tower' and 'feminine sea' are...opposite that are united in the 'androgynous' symbol of the lighthouse" (312).

³¹ The preparation of the packages seemingly confuses (or even annoys) Nancy, possibly indicating that she has no understanding of or desire to assume domestic responsibilities, suggesting her disassociation with faded Victorian values and practices.

saying, ‘There is no God’” (*TTL* 318). At almost the same instance, Lily Briscoe announces his landing ambiguously declaring, “It is finished” as Augustus Carmichael appears beside her like an ancient being from the sea rising to espouse the fallacy of Mr. Ramsay’s proclamation:

Then, surging up, puffing slightly, Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, looking like an old pagan God ³², shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his hand....He stood there spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind[W]hen his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth. (319)

In these two scenes that Woolf thematically unites, Lily Briscoe and Augustus Carmichael comprise a new pair; Carmichael replaces Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. More specifically, he replaces the culturally based ideas that Nature can or should be manipulated or transformed. In this regard, Carmichael’s appearance indicates an important shift away from the myriad of polarizing dualities that exist throughout the majority of the novel. Thus, through Carmichael’s emergence in the Ramsays’ absence, Woolf devises a method of resolving one of the primary concerns of Modernism, “to overcome the phenomenological opposition between subject and object” (Moore 220).

While Mr. Ramsay the philosopher seeks to dominate Nature and Mrs. Ramsay (more gently) seeks to domesticate it, Augustus Carmichael, the poet exists as the embodiment of Nature. He is a reader of Virgil, the ancient poet often associated with the Nature. Offering inspiration through his own “*impersonal* poetry,” Augustus Carmichael

³² “Neo-Pagans” was a “term used by Woolf, Vanessa Bell and other young Bloomsbury group members to describe a younger generation of friends, most of whom had been at Cambridge University...” (Hussey 181).

acts a surrogate for the creative force that moves Lily Briscoe to action (Eliott 364). She describes his poetry as “about the desert and the camel” and “the palm tree and the sunset” (*TTL* 299). While the sentimentality of love is largely omitted, death, as a part of Nature, is not (*TTL* 299). Significantly, Carmichael’s poetry rises to prominence during the years that “Time Passes” occurs, a time period after the physical destruction after World War I. Nature, then, recovers from its wounds and reclaims its autonomy, dispelling the divisive dichotomies behind the destruction.

With her own relationship with Nature developed through her art, Lily Briscoe maintains a middle ground apart from the territory occupied by the domination of Nature or the domestication of it. Her position represents the “razor edge of balance” she seeks to achieve in her painting (*TTL* 296). She simultaneously detaches from the landscape, straddling the shoreline away from the maternity of the sea and garden, and manipulates it through her art. In one respect, her canvas acts a barrier, shielding her from a direct experience of the natural world around her. Behind that shield, Lily Briscoe, like Mr. Ramsay, distances herself from Nature while also domesticating it like Mrs. Ramsay. Against the background of this distance, Anne Hoffman describes Lily through terms relating to her art and the other characters:

[T]he artist in the process of *becoming*, a task which involves mediating her relationship to the waves, the familiar attempt to find some balance between immersion and dry sterility...[while] Mr. Carmichael, craggy sea god, points the way to answer. (182, emphasis mine)

Augustus Carmichael, as the representation of Nature, acts as both “the tamer of waves [and the embodiment of] the solution that art offers—the control and mediation of distance that are necessary to the creation of enduring form” (Hoffman 182).³³

However, as Josephine Donovan, in her discussion of the (absent) referent and the signifier argues, “the signified...need not be dominative if respect and careful attention are paid to the actual realities of the entity being dominated” (75).³⁴ Woolf devotes such “respect” and attention” to her treatment of Nature throughout her writing by including the elements found within it “without occluding, distorting, or dominating them with figurative impositions” (Donovan 79). Therefore, in quite another related note, Lily Briscoe’s creative process includes a specific tree and a specific hedge, much like the specificity of the house, the family members and the memories that emanate from them. Through Lily’s focus on the specific elements of Nature Woolf, avoids the Romantic practice of connecting to and characterizing the natural world primarily through symbolic language. For Woolf, “the literal or the natural is itself significative; it speaks its own language, which humans must seek to hear—not erase through symbolic code” (Donovan 80). As significantly, the fluctuation of Lily Briscoe’s vision synchronically mirrors the natural movement of the objects that she transforms into her subject. Ultimately, under the canopy of Augustus Carmichael, she moves from effacing Nature to suffusing with it.

Despite his notable (physical) absence from the end of the novel, William Bankes still continues to inspire Lily Briscoe. It is in the final “Lighthouse” section that his inspiration, for the first time, directly affects her painting. In recalling his initial

³³ Hoffman goes on to add that “[a]s modulator of the waters, Mr. Carmichael constitutes the genius of art” and, in essence, “functions as the spirit of art” (184).

³⁴ Although Donovan’s commentary concerns “the linguistic symbol,” I believe that the medium of visual art—as evidenced in Lily Briscoe’s painting—can embody the principle of the absent referent as convincingly and thoroughly as literature.

assessment of her work, Lily remembers that William Bankes “had been shocked by her neglect of the significance of mother and son,” questioning her “admir[ation of] their beauty” (*TTL* 271). However, she then recalls that he “had [also] listened to her with his wise child’s eyes when she explained how it was not irreverence: how a light there needed a shadow there and so on” (*TTL* 271). She credits his “scientific mind” to his ability to understand the need for balance and connections within the painting (*TTL* 272). Possibly, she remembers the purity of the image of William Bankes in a lab coat that moves her toward the natural beauty of Mrs. Ramsay and the surrounding natural world. In those terms, it is through “William’s eyes [that she sees] the shape of a woman with downcast eyes” (*TTL* 273). His voice reminding her that “she was astonishingly beautiful,” the “figure [comes] readily” as if through a spiritual revelation. Through William Bankes’ guidance, she forms a picture of the woman that they both loved that blends the defined form and objective permanency associated with science and the varying subjectivity of the artistic vision.

For Mr. Ramsay, the final journey to the Lighthouse signifies his readiness to face the challenge of the sea and purge his fears of self-examination. As Corner suggests, the “crossing...[symbolizes] a new openness...to step outside the refuges of reassurance and sympathy” (56). By taking this physical and psychological quest, he dares to face the magnitude of the Lighthouse. By confronting it, he risks sacrificing his ego, possibly the most visible sacrifice that Mr. Ramsay makes in the novel. To illustrate the liberation that the sacrifice brings to Mr. Ramsay, Corner makes the following observation:

[H]e discovers a new lightness and freedom in his release from egoism, and once the leap has been taken and the ‘dwindled leaf-like shape’ left behind, he finds an

unexpected firmness in that nonhuman reality toward which the leap is directed.

His feet land on the rock. (57)

It is then that he discovers the solidity of land, something which he had felt on the island as being eaten away by the sea. However, Mr. Ramsay gains liberation only partially by confronting the Lighthouse and risking the step onto the rock. He owes his transformation largely to the journey itself. By taking that journey, he moves from combatively engaging Nature to slowly relinquishing his ego to become more unified with it.

Through each of the characters that I have discussed in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf uses their connections and attitudes toward the natural world to reveal their public and private identities. Similarly, the characters' interactions with and corresponding attitudes toward Nature reveal dichotomies within those relationships. However, as those dichotomies are based upon human ego, Woolf uses the indifferent and deified power of the natural world to diffuse them as it diminishes the attachment to self. For Lily Briscoe and William Bankes, the diffusion occurs partly through the medium of art. For the Ramsays, though, Nature finally connects them through something that also both blends into it and towers over it, The Lighthouse. And while Woolf famously asserted that she "meant nothing by the lighthouse," it stands, nonetheless, as a an artifice that—like Lily Briscoe's painting—represents "that razor's edge of balance" between the mechanical isolation prevalent within much of Modernity and the focus on the natural world that its beam constantly maintains. Lily Briscoe's final brush stroke that closes the novel and completes her painting clearly imitates the structure's form. In its simplicity, it "joins subject and object" (Girard 2) and acts as a reminder of the divisive dichotomies that, as an artist free from the constraints of gender,

Lily can conquer as powerfully as the realm of Nature. It is as an artist that she can achieve a symbiosis with Nature, unimpeded by the temporal and constraining notion of "I."

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