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The Other Side of Silence: The Productive Limits of Human Awareness and the Novel

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by

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For my parents, who gave me the woods, and filled our house with books.

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“That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

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Introduction

Timothy Morton coined the term hyperobjects to describe: "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans [...] Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1). The hyperobject on everyone's mind these days, Morton argues, is climate change. We can sometimes glimpse it, every time you start your car, every time you take a bite of a hamburger, every time you toss something in the recycling bin. Each of these small, individual actions is both a reminder of our contribution to the changing climate, and a feeling of the utter insignificance of actions which do not even account for a drop in the bucket. And we are right! Our individual choices mean everything and nothing when it comes to the warming of the planet. Climate change is simply too big an object, and on such a timescale that it is incomprehensible to human understanding.

Like any other hyperobject, we can only catch glimpses of climate change. As Morton describes: "Ecological awareness is saturated with nothingness, a shimmering or flickering, a shadow play of presence and absence intertwined" (Morton, *Humankind* 78). The hyperobject known as climate change is unthinkable, imperceptible. All of the bits that make up climate change are partially withdrawn. It's there when you start your car in the morning, flickering, you are aware of it, you can conceive of yourself making contact with it, but you cannot quite grasp it. The capacity of human awareness—or what thinkers associated with Object-Oriented Ontology—refer to as human “access modes” —is insufficient to comprehend such a hyperobject.

And yet the paradox is, climate change is human-made. How can we be the creators of an object that so far surpasses us in scale and in time? While climate change is not something we can point to, an object like the steam engine is. Patented in 1784, the steam engine engendered a network of machines which grew to become the hyperobject of industrial capitalism. Morton explains:

> This universal machine (uncanny harbinger of the computer, an even more general machine) could be connected to vast assemblages of other machines to supply their motive power, thus giving rise to the assemblages of assemblages that turn the industrial age into a weird cybernetic system, a primitive artificial intelligence of a sort—to wit, industrial capitalism, with the vampire-like downward causality of the emergent machine level, with its related machine-like qualities of abstract value, sucking away at the humans on the levels beneath. (*Hyperobjects* 5)

However, at the end of the 18th century another invention rose to popularity, an invention which, I will argue, extends the limits of human awareness in the face of hyperobjects: the novel. This project is concerned with the hyperobjects commonly referred to as "the social", "the psychological," and "the historical." I define these areas of human concern as domains that are each their own hyperobject, always there in human awareness, but only and always partially. Broadly speaking, "the social" refers to the conditions of human interaction; "the psychological" refers to the work of consciousness; and "the historical" refers to events and objects created by humans and by the natural world. In this project I argue that the novel is both shaped by, and works with the limitations of human awareness to create new understandings of the social, the psychological, and the historical.

In Middlemarch, the social is limited by the verbal and the visual rules of Victorian society. Eliot works with these limitations to create an interdependent ecology where insufficiency engenders solidarity. In *To the Lighthouse*, the domain of the psychological is delimited by the divide between subjects and objects. Woolf works with these limitations by writing characters who objectify each other. This objectification renders the complex mingling of consciousnesses legible in the social world, and it protects the sanctity of characters' interiorities. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the historical is circumscribed by human conceptions of time and space. Sebald attempts to dispense with these limits by creating a world of complete object access where history can be legible in landscape and break free from the chronology of time.

In the first chapter I explore the possibility for Middlemarch to be an ecological novel. By ecological, I mean a system that is predicated on insufficiency, one where the characters in the novel must interact with and depend both on other characters in the novel and the non-human environment. I focus on Eliot's usage of the semiotic social network and management of speech as two elements of the novel that make it ecological. I argue that this ecological approach to the social simultaneously reinscribes and rewrites the limits speech and social semiotics place on the human awareness of the social.

In the second chapter, I examine how Woolf blurs the boundary between human subjects and non-human objects, writing characters who perceive each other as objects and, more specifically, as objects that are infused with social and psychological awareness. Woolf's novel is largely concerned with the problem of perception and the inability to access other consciousnesses. In this chapter, I explore the tension between the object world and the social

world in this novel. I explore how the objectification of characters makes them more easily legible in the social world and propose that this objectification protects their interiority.

In the third chapter, I look at how Sebald reclaims the Kantian gap between phenomena and noumena (the "real") as the basis for an immediately accessible, non-chronological history. Using literature, history, biography, art, and observations from site visits in Suffolk, England, Sebald releases the limits of space and time to access the repetition of phenomena which haunt these places and spaces. In this chapter I try to determine how the release of these limits allows Sebald to use the novel to create a new historical form.

In Middlemarch, Eliot explores the insufficiency of speech and the semiotic social network to communicate true feeling and to adequately manage social relationships. Eliot's characters wrestle with speech, working to wield it so that it can transmute feeling and penetrate another consciousness. With To the Lighthouse, Woolf zooms in on a more micro element of this project. The characters in To the Lighthouse struggle just to get outside of their own consciousness. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are the pillars of this endeavor. When it comes to narrative subjectivity, Woolf has much more freedom and access than Eliot. Only people have the power of narrative subjectivity in Middlemarch; in To the Lighthouse this is opened up to objects as well. In Middlemarch and To the Lighthouse, objects are embedded in their contexts. In The Rings of Saturn, everything is pushed to the foreground. The objects in Sebald's novel create an exoskeleton of total accessibility and exteriority that tempts the reader to consider a world which is not limited by the flickering, spectral nature of history.

Chapter 1: *Middlemarch* and the Limitations of the Social

I begin my investigation into how literature addresses the insufficiency of human awareness by first considering the project of literary realism. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in France, literary realism is rooted in the project of representing objective reality. Elements common to the realist novel are: an omniscient third-person narrator, depictions of the ordinary life of the poor and middle class, and a reliance on the ability of the senses to provide objective truth. For the past century or so, literary realism's authority over truth has been overthrown, starting with the modernist movement which insisted on the subjective nature of reality. Furthermore, there is a growing consensus that the realist novel as traditionally understood, is a disservice to the literary project, robbing it of its aesthetic value. In his work on the post-realist, post-romantic novel, Robert Scholes decries realism as an anti-aesthetic project: "Realism purports—always has purported—to subordinate the words themselves to their referents, the things the words point to. Realism exalts Life and diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words" (Scholes qtd. in Bergonzi 197). In this chapter, I contend that literary realism's adherence to the referent and prioritization of "things" is important for creating an ecology of objects, bound and dependent on one another because of limitations put on the social. What I desire to achieve with this chapter is to show some of the ways in which Eliot's literary realism works with the limits of speech and Victorian social semiotics, to create a kind of interdependence I will call ecological, in a way that is helpful for thinking about how we live with others.

In this chapter, I will argue that Eliot's management of speech and her usage of a semiotic social network creates an ecological approach to the social. By ecological, I mean the novel

functions as an ecosystem: characters interact with and are dependent upon both other characters and the non-human environment. I derive my definition of ecology from Ernst Haeckel who coined the word to describe "the science of relations between organisms and their environment" (quoted in Bramwell, 40). Haeckel comes from the tradition of holistic biology. While in the literary tradition holism refers to the idea that complex systems should be viewed as wholes to the exclusion of being viewed as a collection of parts, biological holism refers to an approach where systems are understood as coherent wholes and the individual parts of the system are understood via their relationships with each other and with the whole. In my analysis I will consider *Middlemarch* as a biological whole and I will be exploring how characters, the narrator and speech relate to each other and to the system of the novel. I will be exploring the possibility for the characters of *Middlemarch* to be actors in an ecological system of social semiotics.

Gerald Levine's *Introduction to the Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* will help me to approach *Middlemarch*' with an ecological lens. Levine separates Eliot from conventional realism novelists by virtue of her work being anti-heroic: "Reality is largely what conventional art would treat as banal and dismiss in the name of heroism or elegance. The sympathy her art is designed to evoke depends on a recognition of our mutual implication in ordinariness and limitation" (Levine 10). Eliot's realism is important to Levine because it elevates the ordinary and relies on an ethos that all human lives are governed by the same omnipotent reality. Levine hangs his analysis on what Eliot's realism is able to accomplish, the sympathy she is able to evoke. What I want to explore is how this mutual implication works in the novel. How are the characters in *Middlemarch* mutually implicated in the events of the novel? How are their lives

entwined and what does this mean for a possible rearticulation of the social? What would it mean for the characters of this novel to not only be mutually implicated, but interdependent?

An ecological system is interdependent. Every being in an ecosystem, living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, is dependent on other beings to create and maintain the conditions for their existence. Every being is therefore also dependent on the ecosystem as a whole to maintain the balance of elements necessary for their existence. Eliot's realism is therefore important to me because of how it articulates insides and outsides; this can be understood on many different levels of the novel. The town of Middlemarch, for instance, is a rather strictly bound entity. Most of the events of the novel occur in the town. The exception of the Casaubons' honeymoon in Rome and the more marginal event of Fred Vincy's involvement in the horse trade, take place in their own spheres, with no narrative space given to the voyage there and back. Within the town of Middlemarch however, the lives of the characters are rather unbounded.

Eliot creates a porous world where all lives in her novel are enmeshed and dependent upon one another. Levine points out that this is true of other multiplot, realist novels: "The formal and theoretical justification for the multiplot novel derives from this sense that every individual life is shaped by connections with conditions outside it, conditions of which the representative realist character is unaware" (Levine 11). *Middlemarch* is unique in that it is not concerned simply with one “representative” realist character through whom the realist world of the novel is filtered: "George Eliot's realism extends from the external world to the world of individual consciousness [...] the question of consciousness, of who is perceiving the external fact and under what conditions, becomes for her an indispensable aspect of the realist project"

(Levine 9). What I am most interested in is this mélange of consciousnesses. How do these different perspectives and experiences of consciousness interact in the novel? How is the authority of perspective determined? How does Eliot manage these differences in perception? A focus on how these consciousnesses interact and affect each other is important for thinking *Middlemarch* through ecology. These interactions are valuable for looking at how the external, or non-human world acts in the human world.

Eliot's management of tagged versus untagged speech is an important method for creating an ecological social model. Untagged indirect speech is very important to this project because social awareness involves a constant questioning of the objectivity of speech and thoughts. As readers, we bring subjectivity to any work of literature, but a realist novel that uses untagged indirect speech creates subjectivity on the level of speech and narration. What is the effect of narratorial subjectivity? What is the effect of the ambiguity between the narratorial voice and the voice of the character?

Paul Sopcak suggests that indirect speech allows for the presence of "two autonomous co-present subjectivities, the narrator's and the character's." Sopcak calls this the "dual voice/subjectivity hypothesis" (Sopcak 19). I propose that this opportunity for the voice of the narrator and the character to inhabit the same line of speech deconstructs the hierarchy according to which narrative objectivity is superior to narrative subjectivity because it is more reliable than narrative subjectivity. With Eliot's untagged indirect speech, the character is not subordinated to the narrator. Miller points out that narrators in Victorian literature challenge the standard conception of the omniscient narrator:

> The theological overtones of the word "omniscient" suggest that such a narrator is like a God, standing outside the time and space of the action, looking down on the characters with the detachment of a sovereign spectator who sees all, knows all, judges all, from a distance. The narrators of Victorian novels rarely have this sort of omniscience. The perfect knowledge is rather that of pervasive presence than that of transcendent vision. (qtd. in Sopcak 16)

The only way to stand outside the object world is to be God. The narrator is not God, they are closer to the town of Middlemarch, almost like one of its characters. The narrator in *Middlemarch* is omniscient but not detached and not impartial. The narrator has its subjectivities.

Eliot's narrator does a considerable amount of work as a mediator of speech in the novel. Working with tagged direct speech, tagged indirect speech, and untagged indirect speech, the narrator mixes and melds with the speech and consciousness of the characters. It was Austen who first mastered the management of these types of speech. Eliot plays with these types of speech in ways hitherto unthinkable. One of these intriguing configurations is when Eliot uses untagged indirect speech and direct tagged speech in such a way that it appears as if a character is responding to the narrator as if the narrator were another character. For example, when Mrs Bulstrode confronts Lydgate about his intentions towards Rosamond:

> Young men were often wild and disappointing, making little return for the money spent on them, and a girl was exposed to many circumstances which might interfere with her prospects.
>
> 'Especially when she has great attractions, and her parents see much company,' said Mrs Bulstrode. (Eliot 318)

Here it is as if the narrator is present with Mrs. Bulstrode and Lydgate. Mrs. Bulstrode responds to the untagged indirect speech of the narrator as if in dialogue. On the page it looks as if Mrs. Bulstrode is speaking into thin air. This construction of Eliot's is a markedly ecological relationship between narrator and character. The hierarchy of narrator and character is broken down when they interact on the same plane. In responding to each other the narrator and the character of Mrs. Bulstrode show a kind of response-ability towards each other as two actors in a network.

The narrator gets pulled in by certain perspectives and then untangles itself again. Of all the characters in *Middlemarch*, the narrator's untagged indirect speech aligns most often with Dorothea. *Middlemarch* flirts with the dominating consciousness of Dorothea but works to subvert this character and practices denying her control over the realist lens. The narrator shows a consciousness of this favoritism and resists it: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" (Eliot 296). In this passage, the narrator manually switches perspectives to consider Mr. Casaubon's point of view: "It had occurred to him that he must not any longer defer his intention of matrimony, and he had reflected that in taking a wife, a man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady" (Eliot 297). The passage continues on with Mr. Casaubon's perspective in tagged indirect speech, attributing to him the common assumptions of men of his time about women and about marriage. In this passage, tangential to scene in Mr. Casaubon's study, all that can be said from the perspective of Mr. Casaubon is his perspective of Dorothea and the ways in which his perspective and the plights of marriage and work that trouble him are just the same as the multitude of other men like him.

While they do oblige him some space, neither the narrator, nor the narrative have much interest in Mr. Casaubon's perspective besides the fact that it works to fill in the world around Dorothea.

This section from the perspective of Mr. Casaubon does not move the plot of the narrative forward, it only tracks Mr. Casaubon's perspective on "this marriage," from the point in his life when he decided to seek marriage to the present scene in the novel. The narrator must return to Dorothea's point of view before the plot of the novel can move forward:

> Thus Mr. Casaubon was in one of his busiest epochs, and as I began to say a little while ago, Dorothea joined him early in the library where he had breakfasted alone [...] Dorothea had learned to read the signs of her husband's mood, and she saw that the morning had become more foggy there during the last hour. She was going silently to her desk when he said, in that distant tone which implied that he was discharging a disagreeable duty—
>
> "Dorothea, here is a letter for you, which was enclosed in one addressed to me." (Eliot 300)

This "as I began to say a little while ago," is very telling of the force the character of Dorothea exerts upon the subjectivity of the narrator. This also shows that Dorothea, more than Mr. Casaubon, is integral to the movement of the novel's events. This movement of the narrator, their subjectivity and resistance to the consciousness of Dorothea creates an awareness of the social that includes an interplay between characters *and* the relationship between characters and the world they inhabit.

This reflexive movement builds an ecological relationship to the social because Dorothea is understood in her relationship to Mr. Casaubon, in her relationship to the whole that is their

marriage, to the whole that is the novel, and in her relationship to the narrator. This ecological structure allows us to uncover amazing aspects of the world of the novel: it allows us to discover Dorothea's force as the motivation for the movement of the novel, it allows us to have a dynamic realism that is aware of multiple subjective perspectives. Characters are understood in their relationships with each other and their relationship to the environment they make up and inhabit.

Unlike with Dorothea, the narrator is more reluctant to engage in untagged indirect speech with Mr. Casaubon. In the passage following the section just quoted, we see tagged indirect speech followed by untagged indirect speech that mingles with Mr. Casaubon's consciousness: "Providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful" (Eliot 297). "Purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex," is certainly the language of Mr. Casaubon and the predominating male ideal in this novel. "Sure to think her husband's mind powerful," tags onto Mr. Casaubon's unique insecurities about his intelligence, which the narrator pities but provides little excuse or consolation in Mr. Casaubon's favor. Rather the narrator takes this opportunity to make fun of Mr. Casaubon's absurdities. The narrator is quick to follow this mingling with Mr. Casaubon's consciousness with critique and biting irony:

> Whether Providence had taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr. Casaubon was an idea which could hardly occur to him. Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy. As if a man could choose not only his wife but his wife's husband!

> Or as if he were bound to provide charms for his posterity in his own person!—
>
> When Dorothea accepted him with effusion, that was only natural; and Mr. Casaubon believed that his happiness was going to begin. (Eliot 297)

Here, the narratorial voice asserts an autonomy. While the narrator does at times contend to mingle with a character's consciousness, the narrator does hold their own opinions on the relationships between characters in the novel. In this section of untagged indirect speech, the narrator betrays a subjectivity in the ironic language they use in accessing Mr. Casaubon's motivations for marrying Dorothea: the "preposterous demand," "that a man should think," "as if a man could," "as if he were bound to." These phrases condemn Mr. Casaubon's assumptions and the comportment of all such men who think only of their bride's qualifications for marriage, and not their own.

The last line of this section is particularly interesting in how it is able to bring the consciousnesses of Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon together in a way that is never accomplished through direct speech. Eliot presents us with two desiring characters and the apparent fulfillment of these desires in their matrimonial bond. Dorothea's desire is legible in the way she accepts Mr. Casaubon "with effusion." Mr. Casaubon's desire is presented with the tagged indirect speech "[he] believed that his happiness was going to begin." What the narrator is able to accomplish is to connect these two consciousnesses with a line of indirect speech, "that was only natural." This line allows the reader to understand that Mr. Casaubon read Dorothea's effusive acceptance of his proposal as the natural response of a "modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex," the kind of woman Mr. Casaubon believed Dorothea to be. Dorothea thinks Mr. Casaubon is the kind of husband she desires: "a sort of father, [who] could

teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it" (Eliot 5). However, Mr. Casaubon is completely uninterested in Dorothea's desires that fall outside of the conception of women and marriage he has already constructed. Dorothea desires a husband who can teach her young, untrained mind in the ways of scholarship and worldly knowledge. Dorothea wants a husband interested in the development of her mind; she mistakenly gives herself to a man whose consciousness has no desire to engage with her own.

This construction creates a new layer in Eliot's social ecology. The narrator is able to mingle and engage with Mr. Casaubon's consciousness and is able to extend this line of thought and reasoning to Dorothea's character in a way that is never possible for these characters to do on their own. Using indirect speech, the narrator is able to mingle Dorothea's consciousness with Mr. Casaubon's. However, the narrator is unable to bridge Mr. Casaubon's consciousness with Dorothea's. The thread of communication that runs through the narrator and Mr. Casaubon effectively encircles Dorothea but fails to connect. It is only through the narrator that this communication is possible. These moments in the novel where the narrator fails to facilitate a connection between characters or between characters and their world is perhaps even more important than when the narrator is able to clearly articulate these relationships. This failure of connection brings in a more nuanced understanding of social ecology where members of an ecology are not always available for engagement. In this passage, Dorothea is unavailable for engagement. This idea of unavailability comes from Morton's concept of the withdrawn object which I will explore in more detail with the example of Mr. Casaubon's character.

Stwertka's analysis of speech in *Middlemarch* from her article: "The Web of Utterance," shows the importance of insufficiency in the human awareness of the social. The web of speech

in *Middlemarch* that Stwertka describes illuminates how Eliot's management of speech creates an awareness that the social is interdependent. By interdependent I mean each character in *Middlemarch* is dependent on other characters, whether the need is love, money, social acceptance, work, etc. And each character is dependent on the cohesive stability of the town as a whole. Stwertka's arguments about speech are important for considering *Middlemarch* as a novel formally concerned with communication, connection, and embedded belonging. In this novel, connection is essential for the creation and maintenance of interdependent relationships. Speech is a very important type of communication that builds these relationships in the novel. Being embedded in the social ecology of Middlemarch is how characters are able to communicate and create these vital connections.

I would like to adapt Stwertka's idea of an "insufficient web" of communication to describe dialogue in *Middlemarch* that falls short of creating a connection between consciousnesses (Stwertka 181). For Stwertka, these moments of insufficient web making are moments where characters fail to make contact or connect with other consciousnesses. This is important for Stwertka's insistence on holism as a reduction. Stwertka mistakenly makes the jump from the thematic tenor of the novel: the diminishment of youthful ambition by social reality, to the formal structure of speech in the novel. In both of these cases, Stwertka views insufficiency as a diminishment of aspiration and the ability of the novel to account for all of the vibrance of these human lives: "The imaged author, for all the copiousness of her narrative and its overflowing resources, makes a confession of diminishing possibilities. She, too, can only work in terms of human limits, must let her vision harden, and, by realizing it, reduce it and allow it to dwindle" (Stwertka 186). Unlike Stwertka I would argue that insufficiency does not

preclude a diminishment. I would like to adapt the idea of the "insufficient web," to consider how insufficiency could be important, if not vital to the network of social interdependence in this novel.

Middlemarch demonstrates how the failure of speech can create and hold open space for other forms of communication. In *Middlemarch*, when speech fails to bridge one consciousness with another, space is created in the discourse of the novel where unprecedented forms of communication must be sought. This space engages several important capabilities for *Middlemarch*: It provides the opportunity for other kinds of communication that are not dependent on speech. It forces characters to rely on a social network to achieve communication. Rosamond and Lydgate's married life is rife with failures of communication. Their dialogue in Book VII "Two Temptations" is a prime example of Stwertka's insufficient web making.

Lydgate incurs so much debt that he finds he must sell his house and move with Rosamond into a more affordable living arrangement. Rosamond, unable to fathom this drastic change in fortune and status goes behind his back, asking the banker Mr. Bulstrode, to take the house off the market and writing to Lydgate's uncle Sir Godwin to ask for the necessary thousand pounds to get them out of debt. When Lydgate finds this out he is furious with Rosamond and his inability to communicate to her the severity of their situation, the actions he deems necessary to take:

> Is it possible to make you understand what the consequences will be? Is it of any use for me to tell you again why we *must* part with the house?'

> 'It is not necessary for you to tell me again,' said Rosamond, in a voice that fell and trickled like cold water-drops. "I remembered what you said. You spoke just as violently as you do now." (Eliot 706)

Here Lydgate is not able to communicate the state of their affairs or the ways that Rosamond's actions have adversely affected him. This is evident in Rosamond's response, all she is able to comprehend is that he spoke "violently" to her.

Rosamond's character is poorly attuned to the consciousness of others but greatly attuned to the language of social conduct, or what I will call the semiotic social network of Middlemarch. By "semiotic social network," I mean the language and patterns of social signs such as the manner of a lady's dress, a man's title, calling etiquette, and the ways in which these social customs are used as signs among characters in the novel to communicate and manipulate social information to fulfill their needs. As the narrator describes in this scene: "The effect of anyone's anger on Rosamond had always been to make her shrink in cold dislike, and to become all the more calmly correct, in the conviction that she was not the person to misbehave, whatever others might do" (Eliot 706). One could argue that this is an entirely irrational and therefore ineffective form of engagement, a refusal to engage, rather, with other consciousnesses. One could even argue that this is not a form of communication but a withdrawal into the self. However, Rosamond's reliance on the semiotic social network, behaving "properly," in the coded ways of a lady no matter the circumstance, is extremely effective in trapping Lydgate into fulfilling her desires.

This appeal to communication based on a social semiotics is an ecological appeal to the character's interaction with their environmental whole. The insufficiency of Rosamond and

Lydgate's dialogical web making sets up Eliot's ecological realism to engage with the possibility for characters to read and interpret their world on a semiotic level. The gaps in the dialogical web also open up spaces in the novel where characters must seek each other out and appeal to their dependence on each other. Because speech is insufficient, a semiotic social network is necessary. In this example, Lydgate must finally seek Bulstrode and then Dorothea's help to save him from financial ruin. This enactment of Middlemarch's network of interdependence sends ripples into the social network and is the catalyst for several culminating events of the novel, most significantly the unraveling of Bulstrode's secret, and the encounter between Will and Dorothea in Rosamond's parlor which leads to the confession of their feelings for each other, and their marriage.

Middlemarch's realism is also ecological in its deployment of unique forms of perception. Star argues that conventional realism, which prides itself in omniscience and "totalizing vision" can at best produce an illusion of reality. Eliot's realism, she argues, creates a texture of reality by interrogating the depth of an object from several different perspectives (Star 855). Star identifies how Eliot approaches realism via three alternate forms of perception: liminal consciousness, bodily awareness, and aesthetics. Star describes liminal consciousness as a "kind of peripheral awareness," one that "moment by moment draws us to the object world and substantiates our belonging to it as fellow, bodily, objects" (Star 842). Star uses Merleau-Ponty's analogy, likening the body to a work of art in the way that they are both synthesized forms, an antiholist approach where the whole is less than the sum of its parts. Star's "bodily awareness" then, is the idea that the body is something characters in *Middlemarch* feel through, and feel objectively, as something separate from themselves. Star understands aesthetics in *Middlemarch* as a type of perception of

"feeling oneself embedded in a given, relational world" (Star 850). A kind of feeling where a character, Dorothea, in Star's example, "at once is 'immediately absorbed' by her surroundings and “keeps” herself distinct against them" (Star 846). I will use Star's alternate forms of perception to conceive of *Middlemarch* as an ecology where the subject (the character) becomes embedded in the environment or object world and often acts as an object.

Middlemarch is thematically concerned with the creation and development of the self. The characters of Dorothea, Will, and Lydgate are especially concerned with their own self-realization which they view as attaining a certain kind of greatness. For Dorothea this is the abnegation of personal desires and the devotion of her life to projects of charity and service to others. For Lydgate this means making discoveries in the medical field, and for Will it is freeing himself from the disrepute of his family and making his name respectable through honest work. It seems counterintuitive then that these characters so often act as objects. In *Middlemarch* however, objectification of the self is necessary for self-realization.

It is now worthwhile to return to the previous section concerning communication and the potential for connection between Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon and analyze this relationship in light of the idea of the semiotic social network. The narratorial passage using tagged indirect speech to describe Mr. Casaubon's perspective on his marriage to Dorothea ends thus: "When Dorothea accepted him with effusion, that was only natural; and Mr. Casaubon believed that his happiness was going to begin" (Eliot 297). This line reveals the existence of two different levels of communication/connection at work in the novel. There is the surface, social-semiotic level, and then there is a level less tangible and more difficult to interpret that has more to do with speech. In this line, Mr. Casaubon is acting in the semiotic social network.

Mr. Casaubon has interpreted in Dorothea's actions the signs of the kind of wife he desires: "a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding" (Eliot 297). In choosing a wife Mr. Casaubon is operating in the Semiotic Social Network. For Mr. Casaubon these signs or qualifications indicate a woman who will make a good match. In their courtship and engagement, Dorothea on the other hand acts primarily in this other level of communication based in speech. The first thing that attracts Dorothea to Mr. Casaubon is his impressive command of speech (Eliot 12). Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea's brief period of courtship consists mostly of conversation and discussion. It is these conversations that prove to Dorothea Mr. Casaubon is the man she wants to marry:

> She found in Mr. Casaubon a listener who understood her at once [...] "He thinks with me," said Dorothea to herself, "or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience—what a lake compared with my little pool!" (Eliot 20)

In sizing up her suitor Dorothea relies on speech to signal and communicate compatibility. When it comes to thoughts and emotions, Dorothea is attracted by the complexity and vastness of Mr. Casaubon. In the beginning of the novel Dorothea communicates with other characters (Mr. Casaubon especially) via a mutual connection to ideas; for example, her plan for the cottages at Lowick or the art in Rome.

The danger of relying only on speech as a form of communication is that speech itself can be reduced to a sign in the semiotic social network. For Dorothea, talking about a plan for cottages is exactly that, a plan for cottages. For Sir James Chettam, Dorothea's talk about

cottages on his land communicates to him Dorothea's interest in him as a suitor (Eliot 32-4). This occurs again in the case of Mr. Casaubon. For Mr. Casaubon, the discussions that take place between him and Dorothea mean very little as intellectual exercises. What these discussions communicate to him is that Dorothea is "educable" and a woman of "good understanding" (Eliot 297). Communication between Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon is difficult not only because they both desire a different kind of relationship, but because they rely on two different modes of communication; and they are not the only two characters in the novel who do so.

Mr. Casaubon is infamously the most frustrating and disliked character in the novel. It is more than Mr. Casaubon's disregard for Dorothea and the characteristics other characters dislike: his baldness, his age, his stuffy attitude; Mr. Casaubon is not only a dull match for Dorothea's vibrant, ambitious, feeling character, he is also no match for Dorothea's sense and ability to engage in her environment. The narrator very often treats Mr. Casaubon as if he is part of the environment. In the discussion of Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage and the following scene regarding Will's letter to Dorothea (discussed previously) we saw how Mr. Casaubon is treated by the narrator more like an object than an acting character. My first instinct was to postulate that Mr. Casaubon is not so much a character as a device for Dorothea's self-realization. However, by analyzing Mr. Casaubon's relationships to other aspects of the novel I found that it is in the relationship between the narrator and Mr. Casaubon where this objectification takes place.

The objectification of Mr. Casaubon by the narrator is best seen in his interactions with Dorothea and Will Ladislaw. Will's first visit to Dorothea at Lowick, and their first meeting without company ends in a rush at the expectation of Mr. Casaubon's return. Will asks Dorothea if she thinks he should take the position at The Pioneer and extend his stay in Middlemarch.

Dorothea revises her enthusiastic assent after considering Mr. Casaubon who is present in their conference like a force or element:

> "I spoke without thinking of anything else than my own feeling, which has nothing to do with the real question, But it now occurs to me—perhaps Mr Casaubon might see that the proposal was not wise. Can you not wait now and mention it to him?"
>
> "I can't wait to-day," said Will, inwardly scared by the possibility that Mr Casaubon would enter [...]
>
> Will quitted the house, striking across the fields so as to not run any risk of encountering Mr. Casaubon's carriage, which, however, did not appear at the gate until four o'clock. (Eliot 393)

In this passage, Mr. Casaubon is treated like he is not exactly a character but part of the environment Dorothea and Will inhabit. Like nightfall or the threat of rain, he is expected to arrive at a particular moment in time. Will wishes to evade Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea wishes for them to meet. Even when Mr. Casaubon is present, he is occluded by his material habits and dress:

> It was too early to gain the moral support under *ennui* of dressing for dinner, and too late to undress his mind of the day's frivolous ceremony and affairs [...] On such occasions he usually threw himself into an easy-chair in the library, and allowed Dorothea to read the London papers to him, closing his eyes the while." (Eliot 394)

In a stark contrast to the animation and ease of communication between Will and Dorothea, Mr. Casaubon interacts very little with the social realm, and even when in the company of Dorothea, is described in the context of the object world. In this passage Mr. Casaubon is accessed only in relation to other objects. In this dressing and undressing of his mind there is no attempt by other characters or by the narrator to actually access the inner activity of his mind. At first blush it appears that Mr. Casaubon has no inner life at all. However, when the presence of the narrator is recalled the question instead becomes: why is the narrator not interested in Mr. Casaubon's interiority? The narrator's disinterest in Mr. Casaubon forms him as the character with the least accessible and most developed inner life.

Mr. Casaubon provides a good example of Morton's withdrawn object. Holding on to a foundation of Object-Oriented Ontology, Morton considers beings as both subjects and objects; sometimes beings act as subjects and sometimes they are passive, withdrawn, unavailable. Withdrawal is important to Morton's conception of ecology: "Ecological awareness is saturated with *nothingness,* a shimmering or flickering, a shadow play of presence and absence intertwined" (Morton, *Humankind* 78). The problem with Mr. Casaubon is that he is withdrawn more often than not. He is rarely accessible to other members of his environment. Rather than having no inner life, Mr. Casaubon's inner life is perhaps too rich and too interior. Part of this is due to the nature of Mr. Casaubon's character, absorbed with his "Key to all Mythologies" and rarely looking outside the world of his research. However the blame lands heavily on the narrator who rarely gives us access to Mr. Casaubon's thoughts or speech.

In the passage above, for example, Mr. Casaubon's arrival is described but his character remains largely absent. When he finally speaks, even this action is more reflexive than

communicative: "I have had the gratification of meeting my former acquaintance, Dr Spanning, to-day, and of being praised by one who is himself a worthy recipient of praise. He spoke very handsomely of my late tractate on the Egyptian Mysteries." Here, we are not exactly getting access to Mr. Casaubon; his own speech about himself is refracted, second-hand. We could then look to other forms of communication besides speech, but even in these other modes communication is obfuscated. The bowing of his head is "a muscular outlet instead of that recapitulation which would not have been becoming" (Eliot 394). His movements are pointedly only movement, no sign that would betray communication.

In *Middlemarch,* communication is the means by which characters create relationships with others. Because Mr. Casaubon is more often than not withdrawn he is most often unable to communicate with others therefore rarely engages in the ecology of *Middlemarch*. But why is this so important? How high could the stakes possibly be for Mr. Casaubon's inability to engage? For Haraway, the inability or refusal of an individual to engage with others has a gross impact on the entire system they are a part of. In Haraway's string game theory, relationships with others must "hold open space" for the other, involve "response-ability," towards the other, and be a part of a larger "sympoietic" system in order for the environment they inhabit and make up to be just (Haraway 38, 28, 33). The basic tenet of Haraway's string games is beings acting in tandem. The prerequisite for all of these modes of engagement is communication. As a bounded individual Mr. Casaubon does not take part in this important act of creating and becoming essential to an ecosystem: "Becoming with, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are, in Vinciane Despret's terms, rendered capable. Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding" (Haraway 12-13).

In *Middlemarch*'s rearticulation of the social, even the reader becomes a part of the ecology of *Middlemarch*. Eliot's use of the narrator immerses the reader in the world of *Middlemarch*, in a relationship where the reader begins to stop differentiating themselves from the reading experience, the separation between reader and text becomes less and less perceptible. Realism is often criticized for the amount of space given over to detail and description. Eliot's realism pushes the question: at what point does the illusion of reality become so meticulously crafted that it betrays its construction? In Barthes' "the reality Effect," he describes Flaubert's barometer as a detail so unnecessary to the narrative's structure that its existence bolsters the realist fabric of the text (141-2). In *Middlemarch* it would be an understatement to say that Eliot has more than just one barometer.

The world Eliot creates is so filled in, at times it threatens to flatten into mere scenery. The experience of reading *Middlemarch* can be claustrophobic. With so much detail and so much of the world filled in, there is little imaginative space for the reader to do their own work of worlding. The work of the reader in this novel is more concerned with paying attention and drawing the details correctly than it is about making associative connections within the novel and between the novel and other works or outside events. When Mrs. Vincy calls out to Lydgate on the street to come tend to the ill Fred there is a choreographed effect to the movements described:

> Lydgate was only two yards off on the other side of some iron palisading, and turned round at the sudden sound of the sash, before she called to him. In two minutes he was in the room, and Rosamond went out, after waiting just long enough to show a pretty anxiety conflicting with her sense of what was becoming. (Eliot 277)

The quality of these characters' movement is almost like that of play actors. In a single sentence the sash is thrown open, Mrs. Vincy's voice calls, Lydgate appears in the room, Rosamond lingers and then exits; all movement is orchestrated according to duty and custom. Something that *Middlemarch* contends with is the frivolity, or at the very least, the complexly detailed world of social custom. The presence of this powerful social system brings into question the notion of social awareness that Eliot is after.

Under another hand, these details that accompany the act of Lydgate being called in from the street would clutter the prose to such an extent that the reader would not possibly be able to account for the enormity of action in the scene. It would all seem like a frivolous show, puppets parading around under the strings of the author. Under Eliot's care however, the movement of one character releases the spring load of the entire environment around them. The sound of the sash being thrown open launches a parade of actions like the falling of dominoes. It is as if everything in the world of *Middlemarch* is lashed together with the same string; if one part moves the force of that action is exerted on everything that is connected to it.

The danger of heavy realistic description is that the world of the narrative becomes so full and detailed there is no room left for the reader. The reader is the most important element of the novel and the work of reading requires ample sensory space for the reader to fill in themselves. This work on the part of the reader is the real work of approaching the social ecologically. Therefore, what the author leaves out is almost as important as what they describe. In this scene, by describing so much of the movement, Eliot puts it on the reader to fill the space between these movements. The result is the force which ties the movement together becomes palpable to the reader. In any form of realism, the reader is in some way involved in the piecing together of

details. What is unique about Eliot's writing in *Middlemarch* is the reader is immersed in the force of movement of the characters which makes the reader part of the tension between them. In this way, the reader immerses themselves in the fibers of the text, and the text absorbs them as yet another of its elements. The relationship to the reader that the text creates is fundamentally ecological. The reader is not just a participant, but an actor in the text.

Chapter 2: *To the Lighthouse* and the Limits of the Psychological

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe occupies a unique position between the class of the Ramsays and the class of the boarding houses. As a single woman, eligible for marriage but nearing the age of undesirability, Lily is able to occupy these two worlds, enjoying the leisure of the upper class while remaining removed enough to live her own independent life. This position gives Lily the privilege of access to the other characters in the novel. Perhaps more importantly, this position makes it necessary for Lily to engage in the work of understanding people; a form of social survival. Lily desires an intimacy with others that dissolves the boundary between consciousnesses.

As is common among the characters in the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are sealed off from the people who surround them. However, as husband and wife and father and mother they are responsible for fulfilling the needs of the other so that they may fulfill these societal roles. The effort to reach outside of the self is strenuous, but it is vital, for example, for Mr. Ramsay to reach outside of himself to get the sympathy he needs from Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay must make herself available for Mr. Ramsay:

> Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. (Woolf 40)

This metaphor of Mrs. Ramsay's column of spray and Mr. Ramsay's beak of brass describes the intensity of the effort it takes for these characters to get outside of their own consciousnesses. There is then a violence of these two energies. Mr. Ramsay's phallic need for sympathy thrust into Mrs. Ramsay's fertile fountain.

What Woolf portrays is not the dissolving of boundaries between objects but an object expending energy for the fulfillment of another object: "Filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied, he said, at last, looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed, that he would take a turn; he would watch the children playing cricket. He went" (Woolf 42). In the relationships between objects in the novel, Woolf is attuned to the social, gendered allocation of energy between men who demand the satisfaction of their needs and women who must provide for them: "Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself" (Woolf 42). Mrs. Ramsay must provide comfort and sympathy for her husband, fill him up with this so that he may have the energy for his writing and teaching as a professor of philosophy, and to sustain his role as patriarch of his family.

A question that lingers and haunts the novel, is: where does Mrs. Ramsay get the energy she doles out without cessation for her husband, her children, her house guests, and the poor she cares for? Mrs. Ramsay is more than a character in the novel, she is a force, the keeper of some energy that binds the characters in the novel together. Judgements and criticisms of Mrs. Ramsay cast by other characters in the novel do not hold for long before they must be abandoned in the face of her abiding beauty and social grace. A mystification in the face of her power tumbles into a blind fondness for many. For Lily however, the mystery of Mrs. Ramsay's power is an

all-consuming question. Lily believes that behind Mrs. Ramsay's beauty there lies a secret, some inner substance that is the essence of Mrs. Ramsay's character. Lily desires a kind of intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay where that essence can be known: "What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?" (Woolf 54). But even sitting in Mrs. Ramsay's lap, as physically as close to her as possible, Mrs. Ramsay remains inaccessible:

> How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (Woolf 54-5)

Lily finds that neither the body nor the mind can achieve the intimacy of knowing another person. Lily finds speech can be just as ineffective for creating this kind of intimacy. The physical closeness and physical acts, even of a bond such as the matrimony between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay still does not make it possible for one person to know another person. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do not "know" each other. Of all the characters in the novel they seem in fact to understand each other the least out of anyone. But what the Ramsays are able to do for each other is to hold open space for the other, and read the signs of each other's moods.

As for "knowing" Mrs. Ramsay, all Lily can surmise is that from somewhere inside of her, Mrs. Ramsay emanates a kind of odor, an unexplainable signal of her being that draws

people to her. But the metaphor of the bee and the hive is much more nuanced than this. Bees create the hives they live in. If the hives are people, this means the bee, haunting the hives, is at once some extension of a person and the essence of the person as the creator of the hive. What Woolf puts forward here is that people are just as sealed off from themselves as they are from other people. The home of the hive, built by and for this essential form of the person is impenetrable, inaccessible. And so the hives that are other people are built in the same way. The bee is barred from its own home which hides the essence of itself just as it is barred from the homes of all others. All it has is scent, attracting it to hives to haunt.

In her careful analysis of this passage, Nussbaum is sensitive to the penetrative quality of the hive metaphor and how Lily's desire to know Mrs. Ramsay is articulated as a desire to possess the essence sealed inside of her metaphorical hive: "Woolf's characters try to solve the problem of knowledge by attempts to invade the chambers of the other, to possess, to grab hold, even to become one with the other's thoughts and feelings. For possession would be, it seems, the most satisfying solution to their epistemological problem" (Nussbaum 742). Nussbaum sets this epistemological problem as the "insufficiency" of our abilities to transfer knowledge from one person to another and our "unquenchable [...] longing" for this knowledge (Nussbaum 732). What Lily discovers in this passage is the paradox that the only way to solve this problem is to eliminate the discrete quality of objects, however, this would remove their otherness (Nussbaum 742-3).

The closest that characters in this novel come to achieving an intimacy and knowing one another is through sympathy. This kind of connection of consciousness requires the mutual

perception of a third object. The fruit bowl, for example, draws Mrs. Ramsay and Augustus into a sympathy:

> And to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them. (Woolf 99)

Augustus is the character least beguiled by Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay knows he does not like her. However, their mutual perception of the fruit bowl creates a connection, or at least a meeting of their consciousnesses. Here Woolf extends the metaphor of the hive. In looking at the fruit bowl and being moved by it, there extends from the sealed person some essence; something that is entirely individual to them, something that cannot touch or be mixed with anything or anyone else. Even with this mutual perception, Mrs. Ramsay cannot see the essence of Augustus, she can only perceive Augustus perceiving the same object and acting upon it. But to be moved by the same object draws these two characters into sympathy where at least one of them, Mrs. Ramsay, can witness the mingling of their consciousnesses around an object.

Looking is so important to this novel. The characters in this novel rely heavily on sight for information about other people and their environment. As the reader, knowing where information is coming from and who is forming perceptions is not always straight forward. The reader's access to such information is thrown into doubt. The following passage, for example, can be read in two different ways:

> What damned rot they talk, thought Charles Tansley, laying down his spoon precisely in the middle of his plate, which he had swept clean, as if, Lily thought

> (he sat opposite to her with his back to the window precisely in the middle of view), he were determined to make sure of his meals. Everything about him had that meagre fixity, that bare unloveliness. But nevertheless, the fact remained, it was impossible to dislike any one if one looked at them. (Woolf 87)

The first way this can be read is that in this sentence the perspective changes from Tansley to Lily. Tansley thinks: "What damned rot they talk." And Lily thinks Tansley's manners suggest he is "determined to make sure of his meals." Read in this way, the reader is given the impression of what Tansley thinks of the company and what Lily thinks of Tansley. This direct tagged speech is a rather stable and trustworthy mode of imparting information. However, this passage can also be read as Lily, looking at Tansley, thinking what he must be thinking: "What damned rot they talk." This reading is corroborated by the dominance of Lily's perspective in this section and in the majority of the novel.

This chapter begins, seemingly from Mrs. Ramsay's perspective, and yet after a little more than a page it is Lily, watching her, who takes over the perspective (Woolf 86). The ambiguity of who is thinking what creates an effect of transferring/absorbing perspectives in the novel. Are the thoughts of characters transferred from one character to another? Do some characters absorb the perspectives of others? And yet it is only the reader who has access to this mingling of consciousness. For Lily, as for all of the characters in the novel, any accessibility to the mind of another is not only thwarted by the fact of another's otherness, but also by her role as a social being. Nussbaum cites Proust, claiming that as people in the social world, the consciousness of our own insufficiency drives us to jealousy and possessiveness when we encounter others: "Proust is convinced that this response to our own weakness obscures any

accurate perception of the other person, since we make ourselves the construct we need" (Nussbaum 750).

When it comes to reading a novel however, we are not met by another self, but by an object. As the reader we treat the characters in a text as objects. As Nussbaum says: "By contrast, we are intensely concerned but not personally at risk. The author is not going to hurt us, and in a sense, we don't really need him" (Nussbaum 750). Continuing with the example of Lily and Tansley, either way, whether the perspective in the dinner table passage changes from Tansley to Lily, or Lily is supposing what Tansley is thinking, neither Lily nor Tansley have access to the thoughts that are not their own. It is only when these two consciousnesses are objectified in fiction that they become permeable.

Before discussing Woolf's treatment of objects in *To the Lighthouse*, it is necessary to address the object-subject phenomenology explicitly addressed by the characters in the novel. The novel is anchored by Mr. Ramsay's notions of "Subject and object and the nature of reality." Andrew explains this understanding of the relationship between the human world and object world as imagining, "a kitchen table [...] when you're not there" (Woolf 26). But this is not the only philosophical framework in the novel. There is also, as Brown explains, Mrs. Ramsay's table, the kitchen table around which she manages the social realm of the novel: "The contrast set up between the two tables in the novel serves to introduce the debate over objectivity. Mr. Ramsay's table exists independently of its observation, whereas Mrs. Ramsay's table is a participatory 'object,' interacting and changing with the forces of her consciousness" (Brown 48). Mrs. Ramsay's relationship to the object world is altogether different from Mr. Ramsay's. Mrs.

Ramsay is almost a supernatural character in the novel, with capabilities that seem more than human.

This force of Mrs. Ramsay's influence over other objects in the novel culminates in the scene at the dinner table. Brown first of all points out, in terms of physics, Mrs. Ramsay's astronomic, object-like ability to pull characters out of space and into orbit around her. Brown cites the arrival of Minta and Paul, late to the dinner, as an example of Mrs. Ramsay's ability to bring, "even distant bodies [...] under her sway," simply by desiring that "They must come now" (Brown 45, Woolf 100). Brown also describes Mrs. Ramsay's influence over the other characters in this scene in the terms of Einstein's relativity theory. In Einstein's theory of relativity, the laws of physics and the relationship to time and space is the same for all non-accelerating observers, that is unless you are near a massive object. Massive objects cause a distortion in the experience of space and time so that for objects close to them, time appears to run slower (Tillman). Brown describes Mrs. Ramsay as one such massive body, and the characters at the dinner table as objects pulled into orbit around her by her gravitational pull: "She also has the capacity to warp and slow time. As she 'help[s] Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity' (105), for example, the moment of the gathering grows 'immune from change, and shines out [...] in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby' (105)" (Brown 45). Mrs. Ramsay's relationship to objects is then much more complex than Mr. Ramsay's mere attempts to classify the relationships between objects, objects that exist independently of himself. Mr. Ramsay holds himself against the object world; he holds a very clear line between what is him and what is not him, what is human and what is not human: there is the realm of the subject and the realm of the object.

The possibilities for engagement opened up by the object world is something Woolf takes full advantage of. The types of engagement made possible in the object world may be a reason why Woolf uses so much nature imagery in this novel. Woolf is constantly comparing human characters to objects in the natural world, people as bees and the hives, for instance. But whereas the hive metaphor is exclusively nonhuman, many of Woolf's nature metaphors have an ever so slight human flavor. The fruit bowl for example, is made up of natural, nonhuman objects, however, it is designed by and for the human eye. The simile Woolf uses to describe the vacant house in "Time Passes," "solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen," implies a human observer in the train (Woolf 133). Both of these examples are structured by nonhuman elements: the fruit, the train and the pool, but they are both injected with human perspective. It was Rose who arranged the fruit bowl. There is a human perspective present in the train to glimpse the pool as the train passes it.

The novel uses nature imagery as a kind of antidote to the superficiality of the social. There is a pervading skepticism in the novel, chiefly among male characters, that the social sphere is, as Tansley terms it, "nonsense." There is a desire held by the characters in the novel, to leave the social and exist only in the object world. This is the desire of Lily, Tansley, Mr. Ramsay, and Mr. Bankes, to quit the dinner table and return to work, work as the study of the object world, much more satisfying and easier to manage than the complexly woven social network. Even Mrs. Ramsay, the peerless manager of the social, sometimes desires to withdraw beyond even personality, to become a "wedge of darkness." "Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience [...] 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" (Woolf 66).

The novel also considers non-human objects in their own right. In the beginning of the second section of the novel "Time Passes," Woolf describes the house at night when everyone is shut up in their rooms, all asleep save, Carmichael. In the darkness, and with no character to perceive the house, Woolf suggests the perspective of "certain airs," and how "one might imagine" their perspective:

> Smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses in the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure? (Woolf 130)

In considering the perspective of the airs Woolf democratizes narrative subjectivity and not so much blurs, but smudges the line between social being and object. Woolf's use of the subjunctive: "one might imagine," "as if," "surely," retains the power of perception as a uniquely human act. However, the airs are imagined to be using the same formal structure of transferring/absorbing perception as the characters in the novel, such as the example with Lily and Tansley.

In this passage, Woolf uses the pronoun "they," for both the airs and the objects the airs converse with. This makes it difficult to parse who is doing the asking and questioning. First the airs ask the roses on the wallpaper if they will fade. Then the airs question the torn letters, the flowers, the books. Then it is these objects that are asking questions about their relationship with

the airs: "Were they allies? Were they enemies?" And then these objects ask the same question first posed by the airs to other objects. They ask this question of themselves: "How long would they endure?" As in the passage of transferring/absorbing perspectives of Lily and Tansley, it is ambiguous whether the airs are absorbing the perspective of these objects or if there is a transfer of perception from the airs to the objects along the same line of thought. The use of the same formal structure with both the characters of Lily and Tansley as well as between the objects of the airs and the letters, flowers, and books is significant for expanding the context and network of actors in the novel, from the social world to the object world and from the human to the non-human.

Still, Woolf does maintain a hierarchy between objects and social beings. Objects may be imagined to have the faculty of perception, even the ability to engage in conversation. However, objects cannot do the one thing that is so important to this novel, they cannot look, not in the way that the characters in the novel can. When the house stands vacant for many years, only objects are there to bear witness: "The trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible" (Woolf 139). Objects are insufficient observers. They can look out before them, but they cannot then adjust that gaze downward or inward. If we return to Lily, watching Mr. Ramsay as she puts her paintbrushes away, we see that it is only in looking down that she is able to access Mr. Ramsay's social qualities and how he acts as a social being embedded in the social world; the objects Woolf describes in "Time Passes," can only "look up," they can only be objects, and they can belong only to the object world, whereas Lily can do both. While this novel is concerned with the frustrating inability of one human consciousness to access the consciousness of the other, it is

also a valorization of the human ability to interact both in the object world and the social world, and the the human ability to both objectify oneself, to objectify others, and interact socially with both objects and other social beings.

Without humans there to perceive them, the trees and the flowers are completely withdrawn. Human objects: the mirror, clothing schlepped off and left behind, although also completely withdrawn, can give the suggestion of human presence: "Those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face" (Woolf 133). While these objects cannot sufficiently observe, as they cannot step outside of the object world, they can hold open space for the social world. Here Woolf considers the object as the form of life, the object as the structure and constraint that contains and gives life its shape. Without humans, the world Woolf creates in *To the Lighthouse* is form without life to animate it.

The objects in and around the house mark the lower-bound in the range between inaccessibility and accessibility, they are completely withdrawn, completely inaccessible. It is well to remember, as Woolf continues to remind us in this section, that we are only *imagining* these objects alone. It would be impossible to perceive a completely withdrawn object. Woolf walks a very fine line with these imaginings. Would it not be easier for Woolf to give the narrator objective status? Why must this section be bracketed by the hypothetical? It is an easy handoff, really; if Woolf were to give her narrator this power the alarms would go off and the gate between the reader and the narrative would close. Think of the cringe you feel when you have to write or read a prompt from the perspective of an object, it always falls a bit flat. If Woolf were

to do this, the narrator would feel like an imposter. The narrator needs to be human in order to be comprehensible to the reader.

Just as well, it would be a lie to pretend that writing is absolute presence. In this novel perception is a flickering, to borrow Morton's phrase, between presence and absence: "saturated with *nothingness,* a shimmering or flickering, a shadow play of presence and absence intertwined" (Morton, *Humankind* 78). What is present to the gaze of the characters is just a fraction of what is actually there, or could be there, or was there at one time but is no longer there, or is there for one character, but not for another. Writing is also a dynamic relationship between presence and absence, the past and the present, existence and X-existence. For writing to be absolute presence Woolf would have to be standing in front of her characters, notebook and pen in hand, writing the exact perceptions exactly as they come to her. Even if this were possible it would be completely unnecessary. The ontological status of the object does not matter, not to the reader. The reader does not care that objects are always partially withdrawn; Woolf's imaginings of these objects are completely satisfactory to us. So too are her characters, for characters in fiction are just as much objects as the house is an object, or the flowers, or the trees. To have something be completely objective would be uncanny, and disturbingly inhuman.

Characters are never fully able to achieve objecthood, not to themselves, but characters do find relief in being compared to the object world. Mr. Ramsay, for example, finds solace from the pressure of human social existence and its existential threat, by reciting lines of poetry. This helps him view himself as an object of the poet's voice. For example, after the death of his wife Mr. Ramsay imagines himself as an object of sympathy by exalting his grief to the tenor of the poetic with Cowper's line: "We perish'd, each alone: / But I beneath a rougher sea," "Sitting in

the boat, he bowed, he crouched himself, acting instantly his part—the part of the desolate man, widowed, bereft; and so called up before him in hosts people sympathising with him; staged for himself as he sat in the boat, a little drama" (Woolf 169). While she cannot understand exactly this objectification of himself, Mrs. Ramsay does notice the kind of pleasure it brings him: "He said the most melancholy things, but she noticed that directly he had said them he always seemed more cheerful than usual. All this phrase-making was a game, she thought" (Woolf 72).

Characters also objectify each other. The children are fondly objectified as the Kings and Queens of England: "Cam the Wicked, James the Ruthless, Andrew the Just, Prue the Fair" (Woolf 26). Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are also objectified by social attributes: Mr. Ramsay by his tyranny, Mrs. Ramsay by her beauty. The children refer to Tansley as "the atheist" (Woolf 9). By referring to each other in this way, by the thing of a person, the characters order the social world in objective terms, making the social realm more navigable. These formulations are used by the characters to define expectations and social roles: Tansley as a lower-class outsider, Mrs. Ramsay as the mother and hostess, Mr. Ramsay as the patriarchal figurehead. But these formulations also, perhaps inadvertently, are used by the characters to protect each other's interiority, and to be protected from the overwhelming existence of the interior of the other.

Then there is the act of looking and the power of visual information. In thinking about Tansley, Lily dislikes him. His comportment at the table, the efficiency with which he clears his plate portrays a "meagre fixity," a "bare unloveliness." But here Lily is observing Tansley in coordination with social expectations. His relationship to the rest of the company: dissatisfied. His relationship to the event of the dinner: finishing it efficiently. Looking at Tansley out of the

context of this social scene and instead as an object in concert with the object world, Lily finds it impossible to dislike him.

This relationship between looking and thinking also plays out with Lily's perception of the Ramsays. When Lily looks at Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, she sees them flooded with what she calls "being in love,' [...] They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them" (Woolf 50). The way they are in the object world, channeling the objects around them and domesticating the object world with the order of their presence makes them beautiful and good. This is Lily's experience of looking at them. When Lily is not looking at them, but thinking about Mr. Ramsay for example, her perspective is very different:

> Lily Briscoe went on putting away her brushes, looking up, looking down.
>
> Looking up, there he was—Mr. Ramsay—advancing towards them, swinging, careless, oblivious, remote. A bit of a hypocrite? she repeated. Oh, no—the most sincere of men, the truest (here he was), the best; but, looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust; and kept looking down, purposely, for only so could she keep steady, staying with the Ramsays. (Woolf 50)

In this passage, Lily is considering Mr. Bankes' accusation that Mr. Ramsay is "A bit of a hypocrite" (Woolf 49). Looking at him as he is embedded in the object world, Lily can find no fault with Mr. Ramsay. Watching him, Lily describes Mr. Ramsay as "remote." In looking at him, Mr. Ramsay is an object whose interiority is inaccessible to Lily. Looking away from him, Lily is

able to access other information about Mr. Ramsay, mainly how he acts as a being in the social world.

These two sets of observations are not altogether different. Mr. Ramsay's remoteness as an object translates to his self-absorption as a social being. As an object he is "the truest" of men, "the best." In the social realm, this absolute quality of manliness allocates for him the position of the unjust, total rule of the patriarch. In this passage, Lily demonstrates the tension between the object world and the social world. Living with the Ramsays as they exist as inaccessible objects in the object world, there is an order and sense to the world that is beautiful, but it is not habitable. In order to make life with the Ramsays habitable, in order to make herself legible as a social being in their world. Lily must keep her perception attuned to their existence and qualities as social beings.

Chapter 3: *The Rings of Saturn* and the Limits of the Historical

The Rings of Saturn is concerned with the limits of human awareness of the historical. By "the historical," I mean the chronological narrative of events and objects. In this case, Sebald is concerned with the historical as it pertains to the landscape of Suffolk, England. *The Rings of Saturn* has all the trappings of realist objectivity. The novel privileges historical fact and primary source anecdotes. The narrator seems to fade away behind the barrage of artists, writers, revolutionaries, old friends, foreign empresses, and chance encounters with locals that populate the narrative with their stories, their pictures, and their words. Sebald uses an onslaught of historical anecdotes to produce the illusion of a history created by multiple perspectives. However, all of these histories are mediated by the perspective of a single, consistent narrator.

The narrator, in fact, works hard to disabuse us of the notion that any one individual could possibly construct a trustworthy history of the world. He leads us through the lies told in paintings (Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson,* Loutherbourg's *Battle of Sole Bay*) and creates narratives of hitherto fairly unknown details in the lives of historical figures: Casement, Conrad, Swinburne, Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi, among others. As a travel narrative, its professed first-hand account of interaction with specific places in East Anglia gives the narrator an aura of truth-telling authority, but one that invites skepticism about the accuracy of their representation.

In my initial readings of this novel I found myself drawn to the mysterious existence of the narrator. Is the narrator identical with the author, or is he a fictional character? Can the interiority of the narrator be accessed? Employing several sleight-of-hand maneuvers, Sebald uses the narrator as a red herring to distract from the relationship he creates between the phenomena (as perceived by the narrator), and the noumena. The narrator talks of a visit to the

tomb of St. Sebolt, his patron saint. The narrator shares a picture of himself among some beloved cedar trees at Ditchingham: it is a picture of Sebald. But the narrator is not Sebald; the narrator is simply a character who acts as a hinge between associations.

The narrator is a device of the novel which organizes the procession of phenomena addressed in the text. The more subtle and more important relationship in *The Rings of Saturn* is the Kantian relationship between how something appears to the narrator (the phenomenon) and the true essence of the thing (the noumenon). Morton's concept of the Severing explains the separation between Kant's phenomenon and noumenon, which Sebald reclaims in this novel. Morton defines the Severing as: "a foundational, traumatic fissure between, to put it in stark Lacanian terms, *reality* (the human-correlated world) and *the real* (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere)" (Morton, *Humankind* 15). For Morton, the Severing is an ongoing trauma enacted and practiced by humans to separate themselves from everything that is nonhuman. This phenomenon is both historical (marked in human chronology as the point of transition from hunter-gatherers to the system of agriculture) and an ongoing practice exemplified especially in modern vernacular of a difference and distance between the human and the nonhuman.

The severance between perceived reality and *the real* is referenced in *The Rings of Saturn* through the life, thought, and work of Sir Thomas Browne. With *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald interrogates a mystery that also haunted Browne: "The invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us," or, formulated as a question: how does the apparition of a phenomenon in the world affect us internally? (Sebald 18). Sebald confronts this question in a passage where the narrator reflects on the vapor trail of a passing airplane:

> At the time I took that white trail for a good omen, but now, as I look back, I fear it marked the beginning of a fissure that has since riven my life. The aircraft at the tip of the trail was as invisible as the passengers inside it. The invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us remained an unfathomable mystery for Thomas Browne too, who saw our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond. (Sebald 18)

When the narrator sees the vapor trail from the plane, it moves him as something portending a good future. Remembering the vapor trail, it now appears to him a marker of the fissure between the thing itself and the phenomenon we perceive. This example of the airplane and the vapor trail is analogous to the relationship between the appearance of a phenomenon in the world and its effect on us.

Sebald uses Browne to pry open a space for this phenomenological inquiry. First, Sebald delineates the place where he and Browne part ways in their understanding of the universe. Sebald describes Browne as one who "saw our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond. In his thinking and writing he therefore sought to look upon earthly existence, from the things that were closest to him to the spheres of the universe, with the eye of an outsider, one might even say of the creator" (Sebald 18-19). Sebald conversely treats the world as a bounded reality. Rather than taking an outsider's position to the world, his narrator seems to be intrinsically and inescapably bound to it. Rather than a detached, exalted figure, Sebald's narrator is a part, just one element, in the network of the novel. Along this same line, the narrator does not choose his subjects by a determination of their relationship to some universal structure. The narrator takes the sights and landmarks of his pilgrimage through Suffolk as his subjects, and

connects them to historical, literary, and artistic subjects he finds relevant. Browne sees all phenomena as an illusion cast by a world beyond our own; he studies "the order of things," repeating forms in nature, in order to access this world (Sebald 19). Conversely, Sebald takes the view that *all* phenomena are bound to this world and, if studied, can explain one universal structure. The fissure between the thing itself and the phenomenon we perceive is something which concerns both Sebald and Thomas Browne. Although they both address this question, with *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald tries to achieve something slightly different than Browne. In the way that Thomas Browne explores the repetition of patterns such as the quincunx to point to the existence of a greater world beyond our own, Sebald explores the possibility of the repetition of patterns to describe the structure of our world. Sebald does not attempt to answer what it is precisely that moves us, nor does he attempt to mend this fissure perception and the thing itself. With *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald seeks to focus on the repetition of discrete phenomena. By presenting phenomena as they occur in the world and tracing the network of their associations Sebald reveals the recurring patterns that echo through the universe.

Sebald explores such patterns through a wide range of motifs: silk and silkworms, mourning practices, light and white, movement from East to West, and the encyclopedia, to name the most prominent. The repetition of these motifs creates the impression that everything in the novel is connected. Silk and silkworms, for example, crop up everywhere in the novel. Thomas Browne, whom Sebald notes to be "the son of a silk merchant (Sebald 11), writes about a "purple piece of silk" in the urn belonging to Patroclus (Sebald 26). When Joseph Konrad's father burns his manuscripts, Sebald describes "a weightless flake of soot ash like a scrap of black silk would drift through the room" (Sebald 108). The Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi, who "had a daily blood

sacrifice offered in her temple to the gods of silk," had a "strong affection," for silkworms, whom "she saw as her true loyal followers" (Sebald 151). The poet Swinburne reminds a visitor of "the ashy grey silkworm, *Bombyx mori*, be it because of how he munched his way through his food bit by bit or be it because, out of the snooze he had slipped into after lunch, he abruptly awoke to new life" (Sebald 165). While he is staying in her family home, Catherine Ashbury tells the narrator, "At one point [...] we thought we might raise silkworms in one of the empty rooms" (Sebald 221).

Motifs such as this give cohesion to the novel; they create the illusion that everything in the world: events, persons, and narratives, all over the world and across time are intimately woven together. It is well to then remember who is controlling this perspective. The historical is always accessed through the single consciousness of the narrator. Silk and silkworms appear nearly everywhere the narrator goes and populate so many paths of the narrator's thought. This gives us less of an idea of the patterns which make up the perceivable world, and more of what the narrator has been attuned to notice. Under a critical gaze, the repetition of these motifs suggest that there is in fact no pattern or order to the world. The creation of associations and patterns is an effort on the part of the individual to comprehend individual objects and order them to create an experience of continuity.

The repetition of motifs makes the world of the novel feel more complete than it is. Sebald's usage of these motifs is a large part of his world-making in the novel. As objects, the repetition of these motifs, their presence everywhere in the novel produces the illusion that the object world is always completely available. The repetition of these motifs certainly does not account for or give us access to even a fraction of the history that is tied to the land of Suffolk.

However, these motifs are important tools the narrator uses to create an alternative historical structure where history does not have to be accessed chronologically.

In an epiphanic passage, the narrator suggests that his observations of the repetition of phenomena are a tangible effect of an "irreparable defect" in the programme of life on earth. The narrator struggles between irrational and rational justifications for this repetition; is it coincidence or predetermination?

> No matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind occur far more often than we suspect, since we all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency [...] Perhaps there is in this as yet unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication some kind of anticipation of the end, a venture into the void, a sort of disengagement, which, like a gramophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes, has less to do with damage to the machine itself than with an irreparable defect in its programme. (Sebald 187-8)

Here Sebald references the repetition of phenomena in relation to the idea of eternal recurrence or the eternal return. His metaphor of the gramophone suggests his narrator is living near the end of the time of these recurring cycles. The gramophone, or the universe, has played the program of the world over and over again, causing the program to wear to the point of damage. Eternal recurrence, Sebald reminds us, does not get us closer to the ontological object or the *real* singular thing; beyond this loop of recurrence there is only the void.

In her analysis of Sebald's prose fiction, Jan Ceuppens looks at repetition in Sebald's novels to determine whether Sebald's works "hold a promise" to the singular (190) or what Kant would call the noumena. Ceuppens asks about the ability of Seblad's novels, in their use of repetition, to achieve "redemption," or "transcendence" (Ceuppens 190). In a discussion of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Ceuppens uses Peter Fenves' distinction between angels and specters to explain the relationship between the singular and the repetitions that occur around the singular. An angel is the singular thing. A specter is that which repeats in an eternal return. An angel, or the singular, is inaccessible, all we can see are the specters that haunt it. Ceuppens suggests:

> Perhaps the choice between the endless repetition of available patterns – the recycling of old clothing, so to speak – and an attempt to reach the singular who (or which) would then no longer have to be remembered is still too neat; the real question would be: how can one be faithful to the promise of the singular event by using the clothes of the past? (Ceuppens 195)

Here Ceuppens is concerned with the presence of the singular and how we are able to access it. Can the repetition of available patterns 'clothe' the singular in such a way that they sufficiently represent it? In this articulation, the repetition of phenomena in Sebald's novels work to dress the singular in such a way that its essence is accessible to the observer. Ceuppens' suggestion is helpful for opening up the relationship between the phenomenon and the "real" in this novel. However, in the case of *The Rings of Saturn*, it would be presumptuous to assume that Sebald even desires to be faithful to the promise of the singular. It may be that in limiting her analysis to Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *Vertigo,* Ceuppens misses Sebald's disinterest in promise or a

faithfulness to the singular. Repetition in *The Rings of Saturn* achieves neither redemption nor transcendence.

One thing that repetition in *The Rings of Saturn* does, is that it asks us to not attempt to collapse the distance between the thing and how we perceive it. Sebald suggests that there is so much important material between the thing and the phenomenon. To shorten this gap would limit the accessibility and dimension of the object. Repetition is a tool that allows the novel to create space between the phenomenon and the singular thing. Silk is one of the repeated phenomena in this novel. Silk haunts Browne, it haunts Konrad's family, The Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi, Swinburne, and Catherine Ashbury, and these are only a few prominent examples. Silk appears frequently rather casually in other ways in the novel such as silk clothing being worn or other minute detail such as the silken rope from which the Earl Ferrers was hung (Sebald 262). By repeatedly clothing the phenomena in the novel in silk, Sebald attempts to grant a new point of access into the lives and legacies of these historical characters. Whereas before, the reader may have accessed the figure of Swinburne via his poetry and reputation as a nervous, sickly decadent, he can now also be understood in the context and legacy of silk manufacturing. And whereas before, the reader might have known these characters in their separate contexts, these characters are now bound together in the context of silk.

Sebald is interested in the distortion of the object created by perception. Vision is a very troubled type of perception in this novel. Sight is employed constantly through descriptions of the land, descriptions of people and historical events, and through the novel's use of photography. However, the visual is also what the narrator professes to most mistrust. The novel relies on sight as a powerful tool for telling the story of how things were and how things are now. For example,

sight is very important in Sebald's section on the medieval city of Dunwich. Catching sight of the modern day town of Dunwich, the narrator latches onto several striking images to tell the story of the city's demise and how it has been remembered.

One of these images is the Eccles Church Tower: "Until about 1890 what was known as Eccles Church Tower still stood on Dunwich beach, and no one had any idea how it had arrived at sea level, from the considerable height at which it must have once stood, without tipping out of the perpendicular" (Sebald 156). This description is accompanied by a photograph of the tower on the beach with the sea in the background. All of the photographs included in *The Rings of Saturn* have the same overexposed, grainy quality. Sebald allegedly achieved this effect by photocopying these photographs several times over (*Patience* 00:05:00-00:020:00).

Presenting the photographs in this way eliminates the difference in time of when these photographs were taken; this produces an illusion of simultaneity and co-presence among the various places and times Sebald describes in the novel. The image of the Eccles Church Tower, for example, which was taken between the years of 1862 and 1895 (Matless 71) appears contemporaneous with the photograph of the All Saints church which I approximate to be taken within the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the photograph of Dunwich beach taken by Sebald in the 1990s (presumably 1992). Reproduced in this way and placed side by side it is easy to forget that these images never existed together in real time. This illusion creates the effect that an entire history of a place can be accessed just by being there. While this is an awesome achievement, it does occlude the limits of distance and time. These elements contribute to the inaccessibility of objects. Without them the landscape cannot change and it cannot be re-inhabited. When the narrator is walking down the coast on Dunwich beach in 1992, neither

the Eccles Church Tower, nor the ruins of All Saints are present on the landscape even though Sebald's descriptions and use of photographs creates the illusion that they are. What's more, the Eccles Church Tower was never on Dunwich beach and never belonged to the city of Dunwich at all. The tower was historically located on the northeast coast of Norfolk.

These distortions of objects created by visual representation distance us further from any stable conception of the object. I would like to suggest that the project of this novel is to remove the limits of time and space in order to create a world where layers of history can be perceived simultaneously; a world where objects can fill the gap and bridge the distance between things as they are and things as they were. Sebald is interested in the ability of these distortions to give us a simultaneous multiple perspective access to the historical.

At its core, *The Rings of Saturn* is a rather traditionally constructed novel. The novel is composed of ten chapters, each of similar length (usually twenty to thirty pages). The first chapter functions like an introduction, explaining the parameters of the narrator's walking journey and introducing several important symbolic devices, principally the work of Sir Thomas Browne. The final chapter functions like a conclusion, returning to Browne, and touching on many of the symbolic devices used in the narrative via an analysis of how they are woven together. Chapters two through nine root themselves in places along the narrator's trajectory through the county of Suffolk. Each of these chapters begins with a description grounding the narrator geographically along this route. However, it takes a lot of work to dig under the chatter of the narrator to reach this structure hidden beneath.

On top of this structure Sebald makes a palimpsest of discursive mental wanderings through history, art, and literature. Thus, while the narrator is physically moving from one place

to another, from a beginning to an end, the plotted structure of the novel resolves nothing. Instead of moving from point to point as the human narrator is bound to, the mental wanderings of the narrator cast webs, connecting the phenomena of the novel in an anti-linear way. Take for example, the structure of chapter III. The narrator covers a great deal of literal ground in this chapter. He begins on the coastline, "Three or four miles south of Lowestoft," where he observes the fishermen. He then walks to Benacre Broad, then to the Covehithe cliffs which he climbs up and sits atop, watching sand martins flying over the sea. He then continues on to the town of Southwold (51, 59, 64, 69 Sebald). These details however, are obscured by the story the narrator weaves of the herring, the estate of George Wyndham Le Strange, his panic, and a re-telling of Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The web of associations connecting these phenomena creates an anti-linear structure that supersedes the linear structure of the novel. In this web of associated phenomena there is no resolution. Sebald does not go through phenomena according to any narrative sequence. No phenomenon is exhausted and therefore the associations never add up to any kind of resolution.

In creating these connections between phenomena via association the narrator seems to always be reaching for resolution and never quite achieving it. Each phenomenon leads to another just as complex and inexhaustible. In analyzing the spectral nature of Sebald's works, Ceuppens suggests that the nature of the narrator as a witness prevents him from ever achieving resolution: "Witnessing, or bearing witness, is always in some way a repetition without a final word: the narrator is no more able to turn the stories into a final statement than are the other characters" (Ceuppens 191). In this reading, the narrator is participating in the spectrality of the stories he is telling. The narrator is unable to close this cycle of witness and remembrance

because the act of bearing witness is spectral. Ceuppens points out that all representation is repetition; it is an attempt at the ultimately impossible act of returning to the original event.

I would like to suggest that with this novel, Sebald takes on a more dynamic understanding of narrative resolution. I suggest that the form of *The Rings of Saturn* is a spiral. The associations Sebald makes between phenomena revolve around points in the landscape his narrator encounters, in ever widening arcs. This whole structure begins with the narrator's first reflections on his journey:

> I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window. Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting. (Sebald 4)

This passage describes a fear that the land is not real, that it is only a memory, a point in a linear existence. By retracing the steps of the narrator's journey through this land, the novel works to explode this point, this "insensate spot," into a spiraling, sprawling narrative that entrenches the land in physical sensibility. By tracing the paths of association of apparent phenomena, Sebald creates a spiral narrative where associations both press in on and explode a point.

This spiral narrative is carried all the way through the novel, beyond the narrator's journey through Suffolk, and back into the biography of Sir Thomas Browne. Sebald credits the following passage, the last lines of the book to him:

> In the Holland of his time it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvases depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever. (Sebald 296)

The syntax of this final passage creates an effect of cinching. The syllable count of each metric clause alternates between short and long, becoming shorter and shorter until the middle of the passage where there is an extravagant thirty-two syllable phrase, followed by the shortest clause of the passage which ebbs out again into alternating long and short clauses. Like the pumping of a bellows, or the tightening of a screw, this syntax produces a rhythm of constricted, measured breath which concludes the novel in a stall, a hesitation, as the reader passes through.

Here we see an allusion created between the black netting draped over the hospital room window in the beginning of the novel and the black ribbons at the end of the novel. In both of these passages the body is compromised. The "paralysing horror," of witnessing evidence of the violence of the past on the landscape. It is at once the narrator's mobility through the landscape that produces the threads of connection which he uses to tie himself to history, and this tethering via the landscape to the past that produces a terrifying immobility.

In this mourning ritual it is believed that death severs the soul from the body. The mourners wish to guide the soul of the deceased easily out of the world, shielding it's gaze so it

can forget the land, the people, and the self, in the hope, it seems, that the soul will not return. In describing the spectral in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida uses the word "revenant," meaning that which comes back or returns. Derrida notes that Marx's usage of ghosts and haunting is marked by a repeated coming and going: "A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (11). It is the all-consuming quest of the narrator to make sense of "the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency" (Sebald 187).

Mourning practices and ideas about mourning appear over and over again in *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald concerns himself with mourning as a process of remembering and forgetting. Mourning is at once an act of remembrance and witness, as in the example of Joseph Conrad's mother: "Mama wore black, which was expressly forbidden by law, as a token of mourning for her people suffering the humiliation of foreign rule," and an erasure of the past and memory as in the case of the character Squirrel:

> Who, as far as anyone knew, had never worn anything but mourning [...] It was thought that Squirrel had no memory at all, and was quite unable to recall what had happened in his childhood, last year, last month or even last week. How he could therefore grieve for the dead was a puzzle to which no one knew the answer. (Sebald 105, 188)

Mourning rituals, such as the draping of the black ribbons in the final passage, involve both remembering and forgetting. The mourning silk helps the dead to forget the Earth and their lives on it while reminding the living to honor the dead by not indulging in earthly pleasures and by remembering the life of the one who has passed. There are more superstitious reasons attributed

to the hanging of black ribbons over mirrors and paintings. One fear is that the soul, recognizing itself in the mirror or recognizing a person's reflection in the mirror will cause another death in the house. The draping of paintings has been attributed to the concern of helping the soul to let go of memory, something that is the lot and the responsibility of the living (Dickey).

It is important to note, by returning to Derrida, that this kind of haunting which mourning tries to prevent is always a spectral other: "This spectral *someone other looks at us,* we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority" (Derrida 6). The existence of the revenant is something separate from the self, something that watches, always before us both in time and in space, in a continual state of return; the revenant invades the autonomy of the self. Heidegger's *Dasein* translates as "existence," or more accurately as "being there," and describes the unique human experience of being aware at once of one's singular existence, and one's existence in relation to the existence of other humans. Derrida claims there can be no *Dasein* without the haunting of the spectral (125). To be, and to therefore be in a place, one must be haunted.

In *The Rings of Saturn,* Sebald attempts to increase the perception of hauntings to such an extent that the self is obliterated, or at least becomes so small that it is but another specter in a world of ghosts. Sebald's narrator does not fight for his autonomy by attempting to exorcize these specters but instead gives himself over to them. Sebald does not quite accomplish this decentering of the self. There are moments where he is able to accomplish a momentary loss of the self, such as when he interpolates the words of other writers into the narrative voice, or in his longer passages on art, history, and biography. Even if we are uncertain of who this "I" is, the narrative makes constant reference back to this singular self. However far the discursive connections stray, and

however complex their weavings, the narrator remains a bounded self from which all else in the novel flows. But perhaps the obliteration of the self is not at all what Sebald is attempting. Perhaps this is instead an expansion of the self, a Gramscian inventory of traces, an unbounded self which includes otherness. Perhaps it is both.

When looking at resonance and repetition in the novel the title is a useful point of reference, only mentioned obliquely in the novel itself. The second epigraph is one of only two explicit references to the title: "The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect (→ Roche limit)" (Brockhaus Encyclopedia qtd. in Sebald 1). Understanding the structure of the novel as a spiral narrative, many new conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the title.

Astronomical resonance describes the phenomenon where the revolutions of two celestial bodies orbiting the same primary object (e.g. a planet) have an orbital ratio with a whole number factor. For example, a moon with an eight-day orbit and a particle with a four day orbit, or one with a sixteen day orbit and one with a three day orbit. Places of resonance, the place where these two celestial bodies cross paths, create perturbations. Saturn's rings are infamous for such perturbations. Let us use the moon with its eight-day orbit and the particle with its four day orbit as our example for the following explanations. Because the moon and the particle possess a common factor, each disturbance will occur in the same place and the particle (being the less dense) will continue to be disturbed in the same way at each pass of the moon. These perturbations may cause the particle to move in towards the primary object (i.e. Saturn) or away from the primary object. When particles in Saturn's rings are perturbed in such a way, the edges

of the rings themselves move in and out, causing what is termed "edge distortions." This creates lobed rings (Hedman). This is just one kind of perturbation that occurs in Saturn's rings and just one kind of spiral form that could be used to interpret the form of Sebald's novel.

Sebald's non-chronological, resonant, spiral narrative is an ambitious and seductive approach to the historical, but one that ultimately fails. *The Rings of Saturn* believes it can transcend the form of the novel, ditching the linear narrative, mingling the author with the narrator, and repeating motifs not only across the verbal expanse of the novel but also through the visual, by employing photography. Sebald's novel tries to achieve too much. *The Rings of Saturn* attempts to render all objects readily available to human awareness, but instead of opening up the dimensionality of objects, Sebald is only able to deliver a juxtaposition between the object we perceive and the object as his narrator perceives it. The root of Sebald's failure here, is that he is all too quick to dispense with limits. In shirking the limiting factors of space and time, Sebald's novel loses the integrity of novelistic form. The repetitions of motifs in *The Rings of Saturn*, create an experience of immersion. These patterns of repetition masquerade as the novel's form but a closer inspection reveals that no form ever materializes.

With *Middlemarch* and *To the Lighthouse*, Eliot and Woolf make much more modest claims about how the social and the psychological might be approached. What distinguishes the works of these authors is their fidelity to limits and constraints. Eliot's novel is minutely conscious of the constraints Victorian society places on the social. Woolf's novel is plagued by the limits of consciousness. Both of these novels are shaped by the limits their authors were bound by. In working with these limits, Woolf and Eliot are able to write a new chapter for the social and the psychological in a way that Sebald is unable to do.

Coda

I did not set out to write a project about phenomenology and Object-Oriented Ontology, and the insufficiency of human awareness. What I wanted to write about was the relationship between literature and the land. I began this project fueled by novels such as Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. The love for the land articulated in these novels is still the closest expression I have ever encountered, of the ecstatic comfort I feel when I am alone in nature. But I was not so much interested in the ways in which these authors represented and accessed a connection to the land. What I wanted to discover was what it is about the human relationship to the natural world that made me feel this indescribable pleasure when alone in the woods.

My first hint at the nature of this relationship occurred unexpectedly, during a walk in the woods with my friend. My friendship with David began during Bard College's pre-matriculation Language and Thinking program. My earliest memory of our relationship is during our breaks between classes, walking up and down the path connecting the humanities buildings, chewing sour-sweet sorrel we found growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. Over the many years since, our friendship has been sustained by such adventures: from wild, meandering bike rides, to hours upon hours wandering the woods.

On this occasion we walked from our dorm through the woods, and out to a favorite plateau overlooking the Hudson River. It was early spring, we had stretched all we could get out of the increasing daylight but now it was growing dark. Across the river lights were beginning to glow and flicker. We leaned against the two trees framing this scene and gazed out for a while in silence. Then David said, "I want to be over there. All those lights and all those people… They

all have their own families, their own worries, desires, ambitions, lives I know nothing about. I want to live there with all of them, I want to know them." This struck me immediately as something I did not want.

"I don't want to know anything about them," I said. "I prefer to stand here, and look, and not know. Not know about their fears and the horrible things they've done. The lives they wish they had and the people they wish they were. You start to get to know people and you find out they are just like everyone else, or worse, they are just as unhappy as everyone else. If I keep the bay and the trees and the river between us I can still be who I am and they can still be who they are. Their existence and their lights will keep giving me comfort as long as all I know is that they exist and that they are there."

What I was not quite able to grasp at the time, was how much of what I said was about my broader relationship with what I called nature, which can also be understood as the object world. Being in nature has always been for me, being surrounded by and a part of life without having to deal with the confusing, wanting, exhausting existence of other consciousnesses. Well, with the exception of a special few. I find much comfort in the silence of the woods. I can spend days alone in this world where I am deaf to nearly everything going on. And how could I ever presume otherwise? It is the limits of my human awareness that grant me the greatest access to understanding my world; and it is a consciousness of these limits that allow me to build solidarity with those I share it with.

To David all I can say is this:

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single
friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore
unsuitable.
……..

If you have ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

Mary Oliver, "How I Go to the Woods"

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