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The Dimensions of Miracle: An Ethics of Mediation in Simone Weil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Virginia Woolf

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The Dimensions of Miracle:
An Ethics of Mediation in Simone Weil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Virginia Woolf

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Abbreviations

AWD	Virginia Woolf, <i>A Writer's Diary</i>
BB	Ludwig Wittgenstein, the <i>Blue Book</i>
CSF	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf</i>
D	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , v. 3
DG	Ray Monk, <i>The Duty of Genius</i>
EVW v. 2	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , v. 2
EVW v. 3	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , v. 3
JB	Peter Winch, <i>Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"</i>
L	Simone Pétrement, <i>Simone Weil: A Life</i>
LE	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Lecture on Ethics</i>
LPW	Simone Weil, <i>Late Philosophical Writings</i>
N	Simone Weil, <i>The Notebooks of Simone Weil</i>
PI	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
PPF	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment</i>
RG	Marie McGinn, <i>Routledge Guidebook to the Philosophical Investigations</i>
RM	Miklos Vëto, <i>The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil</i>
TL	Virginia Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i>
WG	Simone Weil, <i>Waiting for God</i>

Introduction

The Dimensions of Miracle:

An Ethics of Mediation in Simone Weil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse'

How might the world be a miracle? Or, more sincerely, how might we come to see the existence of the world as a miracle, and as a miracle inclusive of its cruelty, its senselessness? Oriented by this possibility, this project looks to how we make sense of ourselves, and make ourselves meaningful through family, friends, strangers, and through the world. Since what we see of the world and of others mimes, always, what they mean to us, the question arises: are we confined to the meanings we read? What can we know of others? And is there significance in excess of ourselves?

In Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, the amateur painter Lily Briscoe carries the most authorial weight; both an artist and a biracial woman, she stands at a distance from the Ramsay family, and, at this distance, engages the world through the medium of her painting. She feels, at times despairingly, the boundary between herself and others, but this separation engenders no disbelief; she trusts in the depth of each person's experience, inaccessible though it is. And yet, through observation and through her painting, she is able to develop a sense of that which holds each member of the Ramsay family in a recognizable shape. She cannot understand how others see the world, but she can perceive the pressures and responsibilities that the world exerts upon them. And her ability to do so hinges upon her attention, an attention that balances the personal and the impersonal, most apparent in her painting.

This project, too, hinges on attention—an attention that refuses to translate its object as its significance to the subject, but that, instead, holds it in one's gaze, without any intention or

sense of possession. Just as Woolf's narrative style renders all of its characters in equity, allowing them to evidence their own capacities and incapacities, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* allows each proposition to play itself out, to demonstrate its narrowness, absurdity, or—rarely—veracity. And Simone Weil, in her *Notebooks*, opposed such an open attention against the imagination, which would, she repeatedly argues, close this attention and obscure both the world and other persons. And there is a semblance of this distrust in the impersonal quality of Lily Briscoe's painting—rather than trying to paint a likeness of Mrs. Ramsay and her son, James, they are manifested as a shadow. Lily avoids the warped imprint of her perception.

Still, that question remains: what can we know of others? And what benefit is there to this impersonality? Perhaps we can avoid making of them what they are not, but can we understand them as they are? One of the purposes of this project is to examine that painful tension between the urge to grasp, fathom, or otherwise apprehend, and the acknowledgement that this urge is the urge "to throw up a screen," to deny another their own existence (Woolf, *Diaries* v.3 104). And what of intimacy? The truly difficult question, then, is how can one develop a consciousness of relation—that is, develop sincere relationships—and yet preserve a real sense of the other's alterity? Is there an ethics of care that does not reduce the other's needs, desires, or divergence to our understanding of them? For Weil, the answer is to devalue your own sensibility, to render it unreal, in order to give reality back to the other and to the world. And the ultimate acknowledgement of that otherness is what she calls '*de-creation*', a method by which to forfeit the authority we implicitly invest in the singularity of our perspective. This has nothing to do with one's speculative intelligence; and there is a semblance of this in Lily Briscoe's relationship to her canvas—rather than exercising agency or intention, there is a self-

organizing quality to the canvas and the brushstrokes, which compels the picture's composition. Lily is merely the medium by which this unity of image is expressed.

Encouraging a similar suspension of agency, Weil asks us to understand our relation to absolute values, like the *'good'*, as a relation to a felt absence; for her, we are meant to empty our desires, our willfulness into this vacancy, and our attention to this vacancy will give us our experience in the dimension of that absence. Like Lily, who mediates her perception through a canvas, and thereby gives the world a relational unity, Weil sees that dimension—constituted by our need for an impossible *'good'*—as compelling the organization of an ethics; and this ethics is rooted in a mystery, is an inseparable unity of aesthetics and ethics, of beauty and the *'good'*. Our relation to this mysterious dimension is something like the body's proprioception—our sense of ourselves is figured in this space, and our movements are made in unconscious accordance with its dimensions.

However, one cannot see this mystery in its nakedness, and such a reveal is inconceivable; therefore, our perception of such must look to intermediaries. As we have stated, neither Weil nor Woolf believe that one can experience the world unmediated. To clarify this precondition, this project uses Wittgenstein's understanding of language and *'meaning'*. To him, while there is no absolute, metaphysical template to which our use of language corresponds, this does not mean that our ordinary use of language is anything other than extraordinary. Wittgenstein folds something irreducible, unfathomable, into our use of language; and, in so doing, he makes any discussion of language's *'essence'* appear facile and simplistic. His attention to the ordinary brings Weil and Woolf's attitude towards the everyday into focus—for all three, the everyday itself is constitutive of divinity. For Wittgenstein, this divinity of the everyday is language, that extraordinary "form of life" (*PI* § 23); for Woolf, it is the interplay of seeing and

being seen that passes between persons, that inspires apathy and flares of passion; and for Weil, it is the "strict accomplishment of ordinary human duty," that is the precondition for '*de-creation*' (N 379). If we do wish to see the world as miraculous, to wonder at the world, we will allow the everyday an incomprehensible depth. We are not St. Thomas—Christ will not appear to us and offer us a chance to verify his divinity—we cannot plumb the depth of the miraculous. And, as both Wittgenstein and Weil demonstrate, if we attempt to apprehend our own wonder, or the wonder of another, all we will encounter are the boundaries of language. To try to explicate the miraculous, is to flatten full-bodied experiences to silhouettes. And what stays our desire to apprehend, to explicate is faith; faith holds us at a distance, reminding us that life, and the existence of the world, is not ours to explain.

If this triad—Woolf, Wittgenstein, and Weil—must be considered in tandem, as this project intimates, it is because each complicates and deepens our understanding of the others. Reading Wittgenstein alongside the Weil, we see, in his later work, a certain mysticism. Reading Weil alongside Wittgenstein, her treatment of Platonism gains nuance, and a complex relationship between the metaphysical and the physical appears, a nestedness of absence and presence that involves no subordination of the everyday. And these bodies of philosophical thought encounter productive perplexity in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Reading the three together, this project explores an ethics of mediation, which might preserve an experience of the world as miraculous. As Lily Briscoe uses her painting as a heuristic medium through which to intuit an ethics of interrelation, balance, and dimension in the beauty before her, it is my hope that this project furthers a sensibility that might extend beyond its limited means.

Chapter One

Mediation, Attention, and the Supernatural:

A Comparative Study of Simone Weil and Ludwig Wittgenstein

For we see now that we have been... describ[ing] the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: *it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle*. Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition in language, is the existence of language itself. (Wittgenstein, *LE* 6)

To try to love without imagining. To love appearance in its nakedness, devoid of interpretation. What one then loves is truly God. (Weil, *N* 273)

With Weil and Wittgenstein, it is difficult to believe that the consonance between them is incidental; living through and responding to a contemporaneous moment—the tumult and cruelty of two world wars, of ascendant fascism, of industrialized genocide—their measured distrust shares context, if not impetus. And, while Wittgenstein set out to problematize the scientific, empirical paradigm he saw implicit in that cruelty,¹ he could not draw something obverse from that distrust—rather, he was resigned to a despairing religiosity. He could recognize faith as something necessary,² but was himself incapable of holding such faith. And, it is in this inability that Weil's importance becomes apparent; criticism will only carry us so far, and we will always need to go further. Moreover, the nuance in Weil's understanding of faith complements

¹ His "cultural pessimism" was influenced by Spengler's *Decline of the West*, which delineated two cultural principles—one of "Form" and one of "Law," the former being organic and artistic, the latter being calcified and scientific—and which, he believed, described the decay of European culture (*DG* 302).

² As Monk notes, faith was something Wittgenstein felt he could not access, as "it seems belief in the Resurrection is necessary for salvation, but salvation is needed to believe in the Resurrection... Who is to break the vicious cycle?" (*DG* 384).

Wittgenstein's profound metaphysical suspicion, and it is on those complimentary qualities that this study will focus, forgoing biographical comparison.

After all, the lives of both philosophers are subject to strong cultural warp; Wittgenstein, as the self-isolating, ascetic philosopher, tempts us to conflate him with the archetype of the tortured '*genius*', fated to be misunderstood in his lifetime; Weil, as the ardent Marxist-turned-mystic, who chose starvation in solidarity with the people of occupied France, is often caught up in cultural hagiography (*L* 537). Avoiding this warp, this study centers Weil's religious mysticism and Wittgenstein's philosophical methodology, with the hope that a comparison between the two can emphasize that which lies implicit in each body of thought.

What follows is, first, a brief accounting of Wittgenstein's later work, and of Weil's religious philosophy, as each should be viewed in their discrete context. Then this study turns to their use of '*mediation*', as reading them together will allow us an understanding of how one can see mediums—be it language or the physical world—as either diluting an inaccessible source—meaning or God, respectively—or as entirely constitutive of one's sense of source. The chapter concludes with a comparison between Weil's concept of '*de-creation*' and Wittgenstein's deconstruction of the use of the first-person pronoun. Throughout, we will address the literary implications of these understandings of '*mediation*' and '*de-creation*', as will go on to inform our reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Outlining Wittgenstein's Later Work

It is to Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, particularly the *Blue Book* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, that we turn our attention. These works, since they stand in contrast to his earlier philosophy, which put forth a theory of linguistic atomism, read as polemical; they are largely devoted to deconstructing those preconceptions of language's function, which are rooted in the misapplication of scientific method.³ However, rather than being pointedly critical, the method of this deconstruction is often characterized as '*therapeutic*', since Wittgenstein employs a dialogic structure that anticipates and complicates the reader's objections, while skirting authoritative propositions or schema. Instead of widening the understandings he gains into all-encompassing '*natural*' laws, he stresses that each understanding is contingent upon the context that gave rise to it. Therefore, his *Philosophical Investigations* forgoes generalizing, scientific explanations in preference for the descriptive, open form of a '*survey*', which traces the language of a specific philosophical concern through examples of that language's ordinary, mutable use. Accordingly, in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, he describes his task as "approach[ing]... the same or almost the same points... afresh from different directions," and describes those approaches as "sketches" (*PI* 3), undertaken "in order to give the viewer an idea of the landscape" (4).⁴ The purpose of this perspectival pluralism is that Wittgenstein "should not like [his] writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking" (4). Still, it is in the quality of a '*survey*' that a sense of Wittgenstein's hermeneutics emerges; by providing us with various, context-contingent examples of grammatical use, he problematizes static conceptions of

³ Wittgenstein's contempt for the scientific method is, perhaps, most evident on pg. 18 and 19 of the *Blue Book*.

⁴ There is a tantalizing parallel here, in Weil's desire "to see a landscape such as it is when I am not there" (N 423).

just how language operates, and thereby, prompts us to value the diverse, organic generation of our use of language above some forever-forthcoming, ultimate account of its function.

Furthermore, in taking his examples from existing philosophical concerns, Wittgenstein is able to demonstrate that it is a misapplication language that produces many of those insoluble questions,⁵ with which philosophers task themselves with grappling. He does not try to answer these questions, instead choosing to deconstruct the preconceptions their grammar contains, releasing us from the gripping urgency they exert upon us. It is this method, one which attempts to "show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" by complicating those questions that confine us, that forms the ethos of his later work (§ 309).

What follows will be a brief accounting of Wittgenstein's contribution to the philosophical understanding of language, and thereby, of philosophy. Summarizing a philosophy that sets itself at odds with generalization may make for an ugly gloss, and is certainly without tact. But, before moving into a comparative study of both Weil and Wittgenstein, such a task is necessary; we are not attempting a synthesis of the two, and so these summaries will furnish us with some understanding of the context out of which each philosophy, separately, comes. In the case of Wittgenstein, for whom even positive propositions are conditional, and always given with reflexive gestures to the context of their formulation, I ask that any reader familiar with Wittgenstein's work keeps the oxymoronic quality of this task in mind; I trust that the insufficiencies of the following summary will only serve to evidence how wholeheartedly Wittgenstein devoted himself to the ethos of his work.

⁵ Wittgenstein, in section 89 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, quotes Augustine in *Confessions* XI. 14, who wrote, "What then, is time? If you don't ask me, I know; if you ask me, I don't know" (47). Wittgenstein valued this quote precisely because it "describes the state of the [one's] attention" (cite) when attempting to translate ordinary language into philosophical absolutes.

In both the *Blue Book* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein begins⁶ by allowing the insufficiency of 'nominalism' to play itself out, demonstrating that ostensive definition—the direct association between a word and its referent, the notion that words are essentially names for objects, actions, or attributes⁷—creates an infinite regress of reference, wherein, to be certain that our use of 'red' is correct, we would need to consult an authoritative reference, which, to be authoritative, would require yet other authoritative reference, *ad infinitum*. In the *Blue Book*, he describes this regress by way of a dialogic scenario:

Suppose I point to a piece of paper and said to someone: "this colour I call 'red'".

Afterwards I give him the order: "now paint me a red patch". I then ask him: "why, in carrying out my order, did you paint just this colour?"...now if one thinks that there could be no understanding and obeying the order without a previous teaching, one thinks of the teaching as supplying a *reason* for doing what one did; as supplying the road one walks.

Now there is the idea that if an order is understood and obeyed there must be a reason for obeying it as we do; and, in fact, a chain of reasons reaching back to infinity. (*BB* 14)

Wittgenstein, making use of the indeterminate nature of color-words and their referents, suggests that our use of words is not predicated upon a logical basis, which allows for the word's use; rather, if the rationale of a word's use is constructed, it is constructed in retrospect and prompted by the question 'why?'. However, when we assume the precedence of a logical basis, we are led to trace this precedence back to an ultimate 'reason'. Having, in his early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, endeavored to find such a logical basis for the use of language, Wittgenstein now, in the *Blue Book* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, makes it his task to demonstrate that "the teaching of language is not explaining, but training" (7). That is, even if there is no ostensive

⁶ Most of the *Blue Book* is dedicated to this refutation, and § 1 to around § 189 focuses on this issue of nominalism and ostensive definition in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This and the following breakdown of the sections is indebted to Ray Monk's *The Duty of Genius*.

⁷ An example of ostensive definition occurs when a mother points to an apple, and tells her child, "apple".

referent, there still must exist some observable way in which the use of language is regulated; and yet Wittgenstein wishes to eschew any systematizing exercise, which would force our understanding of language to proceed from normative preconceptions, rather than from the use of language itself. To circumvent this double-bind, he introduces the term '*language-game*'.

In place of such a "craving for generality" (*BB* 17), which seek to reduce a "form of life" to a system of strict correspondence or construction, Wittgenstein develops the concept of '*language-games*' (§ 23). First introduced in the *Blue Book*, he uses the term to describe the "forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words," emphasizing that "problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question" are more easily studied in the '*language-games*' of children, "without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought" (*BB* 17). Still, the '*language-games*' of children are contiguous with the more complex forms of language employed by adults. Therefore, Wittgenstein uses this term to both illustrate "our craving for generality" (17) and to suggest an alternative approach, which relies upon the recognition of '*likenesses*':

We are inclined to think that there must be something common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term "game" to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses... and these likenesses overlap. The idea of a general concept being a common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language... [Such as] the idea that *properties* are *ingredients* of the things which have the properties; e.g. that beauty is an ingredient of all beautiful things... [and] we therefore could have pure beauty, unadulterated by anything that is beautiful. (*BB* 17)

Within a family, there is no single defining feature that is common to all members, but the '*overlap*' of common features among the members makes them a recognizable family. Similarly,

'*language-games*' cannot be defined by a single characteristic shared by all '*language-games*';⁸ Wittgenstein makes this note in recognition of the term's possible misuse—by introducing a term that seeks to describe our use of language, he is in danger of generalizing or reducing that use to the limited semantics of the term, '*language-game*'. However, this term is meant to induce a recognition of the context-contingent use of language; as Monk notes, in *The Duty of Genius*, when we ask a question like, "What is meaning?" we "expect to be able to answer [the] question by naming some *thing*" (DG 337). That '*what is...*' question plays a shallow kind of '*language-game*', whose grammar dictates what form the answer must take. But, if we understand the notion of the '*language-game*' not as a term, but as a "technique," we will be able to recognize the narrow '*language-game*' that such a '*what is...*' question plays, and thereby, recognize the absurdity of such a question, as it sends us in pursuit of some substantive '*meaning*', which would satisfy the question, "what is meaning?" (337) without relying upon "anything that is [meaningful]" (BB 17). Therefore, Wittgenstein uses "the word '*language-game*'... to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI, § 23), and not a static, systematized operation of signs, which—by way of equations—could be reduced to "formal unit[ies]" (§ 108). Furthermore, implicit in the word '*game*' is the connotation of '*rule-following*', which forms, for Wittgenstein, an important aspect of how one uses language.

While language is not reducible to '*natural*' laws, as physics is, there necessarily remains some kind of governance that allows us to communicate meaningfully with one another, without

⁸ In § 23 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he lists examples, which center the variety of activities and contexts in which '*language-games*' occur; the list includes "giving orders, and acting upon them, describing an object by its appearance..., reporting... [or] speculating about an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, ...making up a story; and reading one, acting in a play, ...cracking a joke; telling one, ... translating from one language into another, [and] requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."

(typically) playing disparate *'language-games'*, and thereby coming to insoluble misunderstandings. This is the notion of *'rule-following'*, the discussion of which occupies sections 189 to 242 in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and which, importantly, takes the inflection of action; we *'follow'* a rule, as the efficacy of that rule is given in our *'following'* it. Therefore, Wittgenstein understands these *'rules'* as a kind of accrued, organic consensus—for example, one follows a signpost because one "ha[s] been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now [one] do[es] so react to it," but will do so "only in so far as there is an established usage, a custom" of following signposts (*PI* § 198). This simple principle—that a sign's repeated use is constitutive of its meaning, of its communicated effect—applies to the *'rule-following'* of grammatical formulations as well; making a statement in English, I place subject before verb, because this rule, compounded by centuries of use, allows my statement to be easily understood by other English speakers. However, its certitude is not equivalent to that of *'natural'* laws. Hence Wittgenstein returns repeatedly to *'games'*, as one's participation in games is of a distinctly different order than one's participation in mass or gravity:

Where is the connection effected between the sense of the words "Let's play a game of chess" and all the rules of the game? — Well, in the list of the rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the everyday practice of playing. (§ 197)

That "connection," that understanding is contingent upon multiple variables, all of which are interrelated and, in the continuity of their significance, interdependent. The "list of the rules of the game" would mean nothing without the "everyday practice of playing," and that "practice of playing" would not be possible without the "teaching of [the game]," which is, in turn, dependent upon the game's "list of... rules" (§ 197). Like an organism, each variable feeds back upon every other, and to privilege one variable as the source of meaning makes as much sense as prizing breath above the body, or vice versa—the body animates breath, and breath animates the body;

the separation of *'breath'* and *'body'* occurs only in the grammar of a specific *'language-game'*, and is not descriptive of what *'breath'* and *'body'* are, only of how we use those words. For Wittgenstein, the recognition of *'rule-following'* is a facet of the technique of *'language-games'*. And the necessity of "established usage" in the following of rules, has, in the communication of meaning, another implication (§ 198): the impossibility of a language that refers only to one's private experience.

This section of the *Philosophical Investigations*, commonly called the *'Private Language Argument'*,⁹ runs from section 243 to 421. It is anticipated in Wittgenstein's discussion of rules, as he asks, "Is what we call 'following a rule' something that it would be possible for only *one* person, only *once* in a lifetime, to do?" and answers, "It is not possible... [because] to follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions)" (§ 199). Therefore, a metaphysically private language, a language "the words of [which]... refer to what only the speaker can know, to his immediately private sensations," and which "another person cannot understand" would not be able to engage with established usage, would not be able to regulate *'rule-following'* on the basis of successfully communicating with another person (§ 243). For Wittgenstein, language is a relation between persons, predicated on that being *'between'* persons—for this reason, he likens the effect of "a person... giv[ing] himself a private explanation of a word" to that of "my right hand put[ting] [money] into my left hand" (§ 268). He can do so, "but the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift," of any kind of transaction, just as the consequences of a private explanation would not be the same as a shared understanding, with communicable value (§ 268). Furthermore, this discussion marks

⁹ Privacy, in the sense that Wittgenstein uses it, is not the privacy of a closed door, the room behind which another has the physical possibility of entering; rather, *'privacy'* in this sense is metaphysical privacy—a closed door behind which the room appears only to oneself.

Wittgenstein's turn from his philosophy of language towards the philosophy of psychology; it is overwhelmingly concerned with the use of words that are constitutive of psychological concepts, words like '*intention*', '*willing*', '*understanding*', '*expectation*', '*hope*', and '*meaning*' (DG 501). As McGinn describes Wittgenstein's purpose in discussing '*understanding*', he does so "to direct us away from a concern with speculating about what is occurring, as it were, inside the subject (either in his mind or his brain) when he hears and understands a word, and towards a concern with the grammar of the concept of understanding, as it is revealed in the way we operate with the word 'understand'" (RG 135). His argument is meant to dissuade the attribution of '*essential*' qualities to consciousness, as well as abstracted explanations of the nature of conscious experience. Instead of such conjecture, Wittgenstein means to "give... the morphology of the uses of" such psychological "expressions" (DG 501), allowing us to consider what significance the philosophy of language bears on the study of psychology.

We will, for the present, refrain from addressing this turn in his thought, as this turn, in many ways, represents the transition from the articulation of a methodology to the application of that method; in this chapter, Wittgenstein's method will be of primary use to us in our comparative study. However, we will return to Wittgenstein's consideration of the philosophy of psychology in our second chapter, paying particular attention to understandings of '*aspect-perception*' and '*recognition*' in part XI of his *Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment*.

Outlining Weil's Philosophical Mysticism

Simone Weil's philosophy is available to us mostly through posthumously compiled and published works;¹⁰ because she never attempted to systematize her mature understandings in a single, cohesive vision, the task of summary is difficult. Furthermore, the interdependence of her philosophical precepts makes a compartmentalized discussion of those precepts inopportune, and her attitude towards the principles she articulates is evasive; rather than seeing her philosophical arguments as self-satisfactory, she stresses that their significance is contingent upon their relation to one's attention and actions:

Precepts are not given in order to be put into practice, but practice is prescribed in order to understand precepts. They are like scales in music. One does not play Bach without having practised scales. But nor does one practise scales for the sake of the scales.

(N 267)

As such, Weil's philosophy is not explanatory. Certainly, it contains descriptions of a universe split into tiered and "super[im]posed readings" (267), but the potency of those descriptions is that they arise from a technique applied to life and the world, ordinary as they often are. And that application, like scales becoming true melody, will be a complication of the precepts one has practiced. With this in mind, I suggest that our discussion of Weil's philosophical thought should begin with the notion of '*de-creation*'.

'De-creation' is at the center of Weil's philosophical argument, and it implicates her conception of God. For Weil, the creation of the natural universe was the conception of matter and consciousness only because the supernatural, God, abdicated that universe; God "renounce[d]—in a sense—being everything" (193). She understands the existence of specified

¹⁰ Her student dissertation, *Science et perception dans Descartes*, and certain essays, submitted to philosophy journals, were published before her death, but the works that have contributed to her reputation were published posthumously.

states of matter and autonomous individuals as the effect of God's absenting himself, as dependent upon that absence.¹¹ Otherwise, such an omnipotent presence would render those particularities and autonomies inconceivable. However, of primary importance is the reasoning Weil gives for this abdication: "It is God who out of love withdraws from us so that we can love him" (401). That this '*can*', this capacity to love God hinges upon his withdrawal is demonstrative of Weil's understanding of our autonomous existence; were God present there would be no choice but to love God, for God would "be everything" (193) and "God... is nothing else but Love" (401). In this way, Weil takes a somewhat Wittgensteinian approach to one of theology's enduring puzzles; rather than constructing a traditional theodicy—that is, attempting to answer the question of why, if an omnipotent, '*good*' God exists, would he permit manifestations of '*evil*' within the world¹²—she complicates the preconceptions implicit in that question. Specifically, for Weil, what '*existence*' would mean in divine terms is decidedly foreign to our normative understanding of the term '*existence*', the grammar of which is shaped by the customs of describing natural phenomena. In those terms, we would say: God does not exist, but that nonexistence is intentional, as it permits us to exist. And, as '*being*' is wholly natural and base, not '*supernatural*' and divine, that permittance must also be the permittance of evil. As a result, God's love does not take only the form of the '*good*', but is instead all that results from his intentional withdrawal, including "relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labor, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, [and] disease"

¹¹ Though there appears to be no reference to Pascal in Weil's *Notebooks*, such a sentiment rings of his *deus absconditus*.

¹² As Leibniz first did in his work *Théodicée*, which attempted to make an evidently flawed world consistent with the existence of God.

(401). These, as the intermingled effects of material '*necessity*' and human autonomy,¹³ are the required preconditions of our existence, an existence we are allowed out of love.¹⁴ However, both the realization that God "has not created anything else but love" (401), and the '*supernatural*' experience of that love are exterior to our normative understanding of the term '*existence*'; as such, it requires one to complicate a metaphysical dichotomy of '*existence/non-existence*', a complication predicated on the "imitation of God's renunciation in creation," on '*de-creation*' (193). As Weil writes, "God can only love in us this consent we show in withdrawing in order to allow him to pass, in the same way as he himself, the Creator, has withdrawn in order to allow us to *be*" (401). For God's love to be felt, we must consent to be '*de-created*', must renounce our autonomy—autonomy's "virtue becomes apparent through a refusal" of autonomy (485). Of course, Weil is not suggesting suicide or any other extinction of consciousness, as she writes, "I do not in the least desire that I should no longer be able to feel this created world, but that it should not be to me personally that it is made sensible" (422). It is this emphasis on the personal means of a world "made sensible" that further qualifies the notion of '*de-creation*', and which prompts us to examine Weil's understanding of the '*self*'.

In *Forms of the Implicit Love of God* we receive a clear articulation of this notion, one that explicates Weil's Cartesian influence and her treatment of that duality. She writes:

Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time the center, so each man imagines he is situated in the center of the world. The illusion of perspective places him

¹³ Thus Weil writes, "There is only one way of never receiving anything but the good. It is to know, with our whole soul and not just abstractly, that men who are not animated by pure charity are merely wheels in the mechanism of the order of the world, like inert matter" (WG 157).

¹⁴ Though Weil sees these are inherent flaws, that does not mean that she is fatalistic about the conditions of humanity—rather, she understands that the means for social change and reform must not come out of our material necessity or autonomy; instead the means of such must be grace. Her spiritual concerns did not replace her political and social ones—they grew out of those.

at the center of space; an illusion of the same kind falsifies his idea of time; and yet another kindred illusion arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him. This illusion is extended even to our sense of existence, on account of the intimate connection between our sense of value and our sense of being; being seems to us less and less concentrated the farther it is removed from us. (*WG* 158)

Like Descartes, Weil centers an "entirely self-contained consciousness" (Winch, *JB* 8). And, like Descartes, she holds the empirical, Aristotelian understandings of that consciousness in doubt; however, her characterization of that singularly verifiable locus of thought, in her early student dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes*, "does not emphasize [its] existential conclusion in the way Descartes does," as Weil reformulates Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," as "I (can) act, therefore I am" (9).¹⁵ This emphasis on activity—wherein one's ability to declare '*I am*' is in the condition of discretionary action—is evident in Weil's stressing of the fact that "each man imagines" his situation, and that this imagining produces "illusion[s]," as well as "arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him" (*WG* 158). Furthermore, the stressing of '*activity*' over '*existence*' allows the possibility of '*de-creation*' as a kind of non-action; rather than doubting the veracity of the senses, which are founded in a physical, perspectival centering, Weil casts doubt upon the conflation of such with a metaphysical centering, with "our sense of existence" (158). She sees that conflation as the result of our *acting* upon apparent reality, an activity which is fundamentally based in the imagination, as it allows one to construct continuity in the past and expectation in the future (*N* 244), as well as allowing for the devaluing of states of '*being*' that diverge with, or are at a distance from, our own interconnected sense of "value [and] being" (*WG* 158). As Miklos Vëto puts it: by actively centering the value of '*being*' in ourselves, "we are incapable of recognizing that others have as much right to esteem themselves centers as

¹⁵ In the original French: "Je pense, donc je suis," becomes "Je puis, donc je suis" (*JB* 9).

we do" (*RM* 21). Said more bluntly: "personal and autonomous existence, that is to say, the self, [is]... in its true sense, the negation of the other" (21). This *'other'*, for Weil, includes God. And this is where her advocacy of *'de-creation'* becomes important; in order to disconnect that sense of metaphysical value from our perspectival centering, from our *'being'*, we must renounce our existence as autonomous selves, as that autonomy is a poor facsimile of the omnipotence of God, is a "false divinity" (*WG* 159), and obscures what is truly, supernaturally *'good'* about his omnipotence—the renunciation of that omnipotence.

Notably, this autonomy cannot be autonomously renounced; as Weil writes, "Renunciation involves our passing through anguish... [as] we must not lay... these things down of ourselves, but lose them—like Job" (*N* 203). The importance of *'necessity'*, as the order of the created world, is herein—while the autonomous aspect of ourselves can imagine itself metaphysical, it is the body that betrays the baseness of our *'being'*, exposing us to the physical *'necessity'* of the world, and thereby, to bodily suffering. And, for Weil, there are two modes of *'necessity'*; the first is this explicit ordering of the world according to natural force, and the second is an *'obedience to necessity'*. The first is the source of deprivation, of the experience of bodily anguish. And furthermore, its governance extended to incorporeal experience, as Weil makes an explicit parallel between that which sustains one's physical *'being'* and that which enables a sense of metaphysical of *'being'*:

The source of man's moral energy lies outside him, as does that of his physical energy (food, respiration). He generally finds it, and that is why he has the illusion—as on the physical plane—that his being carries the principle of preservation within itself. Privation alone makes him feel his need. (222)

Just as one's sense of physical autonomy is both enabled by sustenance and belied by the necessity of that sustenance, so too, the reification of one's *'metaphysical autonomy'* is dependent

upon "energy" received from outside oneself; and the terms of this reception are governed by '*necessity*' (222). Thereby, it is '*necessity*' that can deprive us of our sense of autonomy, as it is '*necessity*' that makes us subject to the world's insufficiencies, to the loss of family and friends, and to chance. And, in the face of this deprivation, we must¹⁶ either pursue the energy gained of imagination and idolatry (505),¹⁷ or accept an '*obedience to necessity*' out of "love [of] necessity," understanding its ordering of the world as the love of God (96).

As "God... is nothing else but Love" (401) these are, accordingly, the two faces of God's love: '*necessity*' and '*obedience to necessity*'. The latter is, crucially, a facet of '*de-creation*'. '*Necessity*' is the impersonal value of material creation, of God's withdrawal. '*Obedience to necessity*' is the value of *the Incarnation*¹⁸ and its culmination, *the Passion*, Christ's "act... of obedience" (263); despite "the bloody sweat, the unsatisfied desire to find consolation among his friends, the supplication to be spared, the feeling of being forsaken by God," Christ consented to his crucifixion (263). And, importantly, the '*obedience*' of the Passion is not something we can imagine or desire, for

...it is at the same time an offering freely consented to and a punishment undergone entirely against one's will. If one only saw therein the offering, one could desire as much for oneself. But one cannot desire a punishment that is undergone against one's will... the irreducible nature of suffering, which makes it impossible for us not to have horror of it at the moment when we are undergoing it, is ultimately designed to arrest the will, just as

¹⁶ Importantly, we should not understand God's will to be causal; "One must not say that God wants the suffering of a saint with a view to his progress towards perfection, but: he wants his suffering, and he wants his progress, and he wants the relationship between the two—and a host of other relationships besides" (N 266).

¹⁷ Critiquing Christian practice, Weil gives an example: "Belief in immortality is harmful because it is not in our power to conceive of a soul as really incorporeal. So this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life, and it robs death of its purpose" (492).

¹⁸ Weil notes that, for Christianity to truly be '*supernatural*', it is necessary that we "have a just man [Christ] to imitate so that the imitation of God does not simply remain an empty phrase" (415).

an absurdity arrests the intelligence, or absence, non-existence, arrests love. So that man, having come to the end of his human faculties, may stretch out his arms, stop, look up and wait. (*N* 415)

If we truly seek the '*supernatural*', it is Christ's '*obedience*' we must imitate; we must consent to '*necessity*' without resisting, or otherwise acting upon the order of the world. At the same time, this consent cannot be desire—rather, it must "arrest the will," appearing not as an act of agency, but as an '*obedience to necessity*' (415). Furthermore, this '*obedience*' must bring us "to the end of [our]... faculties" (415), must exhaust our ability to will and understand, to "personally ma[k]e" that '*obedience*' "sensible" (422), in order that we may "wait" (415). This waiting is both a mode of '*attention*' and of humility, "as in the domain of the intelligence, the virtue of humility is nothing other than... attention" (245). When our will, our intelligence, and our love are "arrest[ed]," we "look up" (415), we turn away from natural consolations, and, with "our thought empty, waiting, not seeking anything" (*WG* 112), become receptive to the '*supernatural*'. It is for the sake of this '*supernatural*' love that "attention... is a negative effort" (111), and through the medium of an empty '*attention*' that the '*good*' is felt (*N* 343). This is an evasive understanding, and so, to further explicate the terms of this emptiness, I suggest we turn to Weil's understanding of the '*good*'.

Weil's understanding of the '*good*' is inextricable from her conception of divinity, and her treatment of the '*good*' is demonstrative of her philosophical attitude; she writes:

The good represents for us a nothingness, since no one thing is in itself good. But this nothingness is not a non-being, not something unreal. Everything which exists is unreal compared to it. This nothingness is at least as real as we are ourselves. For our very being is nothing else [other] than this need for the good. The absolute good lies wholly within this need. But we are unable to go and lay a hold of it therein.¹⁹

¹⁹ *N* 491

Weil refuses to allow our understanding of the relation between the '*good*' and our experience thereof to be neatly partitioned between a physical realm and a metaphysical one, between reality and unreality; instead, she stresses the "represent[ative]" quality of its absence (491), thereby casting that absence in the medium of a "hierarchy of values" (*WG* 158). For Weil, this lack of the "good... *in itself*," which is manifest in our values, is a handhold, an instrumental vacancy—if we consider this "nothingness... not [as] something unreal," then "everything which exists is unreal compared to it" (*N* 491 *emph. added*). By virtue of this comparison, we can perform an inversion, wherein the seeming unreality of the '*good*' is conferred upon "everything which exists" (491). And, again, Weil emphasizes the how the absence of the '*good*' is "an absence that is felt," (343) for the absence of the '*good*' is like that of God, as "he whom we must love is absent" (219). She locates both that which is essentially human, "our very being," and the "absolute good" within this felt absence, "this need for the good" (491). Thereby, Weil refuses to locate the '*good*' on a structurally higher, metaphysical plane. Rather, the "absolute good lies wholly within this need" for the '*good*'; and, if our sense of the '*good*' is constituted by our need for the '*good*', then the satisfaction of that need would nullify the means of its constitution. For this reason, "we are unable to go and lay a hold of" the '*good*' within our want of it—and precisely because of this unattainable quality, it is to the absolute '*good*' that we should channel our capacity for desire (491). As the '*good*', being central to Weil's philosophical understandings, is only a metaphysical value within our need for metaphysical value, it would appear that we cannot treat of Weil as a typical metaphysician. However, in order to contextualize the forthcoming discussion about mediation, as relates to Wittgenstein's treatment of '*meaning*', we should acknowledge the debate over this point; many understand Weil as a sincere, if nuanced, Christian Platonist, while others view her as a philosopher with the "ability to address and

incorporate important classical philosophical and spiritual questions without subscribing to the metaphysics by which previous generations had attempted to address them" (*RM* vii). In order to further an understanding of '*mediation*' that does not presuppose an unreachable, pervading source behind the medium, we must be able to distance Weil from an uncomplicated notion of Platonic idealism; to do so, we should examine the argument over the condition of metaphysics in Weil's thought.

On either side of this debate are two sources previously cited; the first is Miklos Vëto's *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*. This text maintains that Weil's thought is best understood as "an integrated, profoundly coherent whole," (*RM* 4) concerned with "the metaphysics of conversion," and which understands "the concept of *decreation* [as] the metaphysical expression of the mystic way" (9). Thereby, Vëto is inclined to formulate such propositions as, "It is through non-being that we participate in the good, not through being which harms the good and which, it seems, ought to be eliminated in some way" (155), propositions that assume an opposition and a boundary between corrupted, physical existence and pure, metaphysical (non-) existence, a boundary across which one must be '*converted*'. In contrast, our other source, Peter Winch's *The Just Balance*, treats of Weil as a post-metaphysical philosopher, whose use of "the language of the supernatural" should not be "take[n]... in a metaphysical way" (*JB* 204); instead, he contends, we must understand that, "to speak in the terms of this language is... to express faith... [and] faith does not consist in the holding of a theory based on argument, in thinking a certain view is justified; it involves thinking in a way to which one recognizes questions of justification to be irrelevant" (204). Furthermore, the supernatural does not transcend the natural, since they are not "in competition with one another" and one with faith in the '*supernatural*' "does not act *contrary* to the laws of nature" (211). Rather, Winch's

interpretation of Weil emphasizes that, "one who is open to God's grace," (211) is one who understands, in the material '*necessity*' and suffering of the world, an implicit divinity. For the faithful, the "brute necessity... in the beauty of the world... becomes an object of love" (*WG* 128), and such a "becom[ing]" is, for them, "*a reflection of [their] own aspiration towards the good*" (*JB* 211). Winch centers the acceptance, which occurs "in a spirit of *obedience*, [of] the necessities to which one, like everything and everyone else, is subject," as attitude towards those necessities that is '*supernatural*' (211). Important in this '*supernatural*' attitude is the realization of "earthly things as the criterion of spiritual things" (Weil, *FLN* 147). To further understand this post-metaphysical reading of Weil, as is advocated by Winch, I suggest we should turn to our comparative study between Wittgenstein and Weil, as Wittgenstein's conception of the mediation of '*meaning*' in language will illuminate our understanding of the '*supernatural*' in Weil's philosophy.

Mediation as Method and Meaning

Both Wittgenstein and Weil developed their philosophies within subjects defined by a classical discourse, which held a perceptible result, in mediation, as distanced from its source—for Wittgenstein, this was the understanding of language as mediating a preexistent '*meaning*', and for Weil, it was a conception of Platonic correspondence between mankind, the material universe and their creator, an absolute God. While it would be erroneous to assert that Weil departs entirely from this discourse,²⁰ Wittgenstein's attitude towards mediation is illustrative of just how Weil's thought is critical of that discourse, and need not rely upon a sense of metaphysical correspondence. This attitude is opposed to any valuation of intermediaries that operates upon a strict dichotomy between direct and indirect contact—wherein, while a medium deprives us of direct contact, it nevertheless allows us indirect contact. Those valuations, by both conceiving and withholding the possibility of direct contact, present the notion of indirect contact via mediation as a kind of resignation; we are understood as unable to access a '*source*' in its purity, and therefore must resign ourselves to the dilution the medium effects. Much of Weil's philosophy can appear to endorse such an appraisal of mediation, but, I argue, there are significant aspects of her thought that diverge from those valuations, and these aspects are accentuated when compared with Wittgenstein's attitude towards mediation; both philosophers treat of their respective mediums, not as merely manifesting the energy of a source separate and inaccessible, but as of principle importance, as constitutive of such a sense of '*source*'.

While it is a veritable axiom of Wittgenstein's thought that there is no substantive '*meaning*', no non-linguistic '*thought*' that one could retrieve from a space prior to meaningful

²⁰ As Winch notes, "Weil repeatedly does write in ways which seem to go against this way of thinking" of the '*supernatural*' as accessible solely in faith (*JB* 204).

language,²¹ he nevertheless acknowledges *a sense* in which we see the use of words as mediating '*meaning*', even if that mediation is constitutive of '*meaning*'. In his 1946-7 lectures on the philosophy of psychology, Wittgenstein addressed the question, "What is thinking?" (*DG* 501):

Now let us go back to the last day. You must remember I suggested (i) we want analysis. This wouldn't do unless it meant (ii) we want the definition of thinking. And then I made a fishy step. I suggested: Perhaps we really want the use of 'thinking'. 'But', you say, 'clearly, we don't want to know about the "use of words"'. And, in a sense, we clearly don't. (501)

It is "in [this] sense" that we see words as mediating meaning (501), and would like to get beyond that "use of words" to meaning *in itself*, to "pure [meaning], unadulterated by anything that is [meaningful]" (*BB* 17). Of course, for Wittgenstein, there is no '*meaning*' prior to its expression in language, at least not that can be addressed, as any addressal of such will take the customs of language, or otherwise be meaningless. And yet, we do not "want to know about the 'use of words'" as an end *in itself* either (*DG* 501); the desire to understand *how words mean* is not dissolved by the realization that '*meaning*' is not a substantive we can apprehend and define. It is to this desire that Wittgenstein's work is dedicated, as he applies the form of a '*survey*' to this want, in order to demonstrate that the '*essence*' of language is not "something that lies within, which we perceive when we see *right into* [or *through*] the thing [or medium], and which analysis is supposed to unearth" (*PI*, § 92). Instead, Wittgenstein is attempting to shift us from the intentional activity of analysis towards an open '*attention*', which "sees the essence of things... as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* through a process of ordering" (*PI* § 92). The nuance Wittgenstein displays—wherein neither '*meaning*' in

²¹ As he writes, in § 329 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: "When I think I words, I don't have 'meanings' in my mind in addition to verbal expressions; rather, language itself is the vehicle of thought."

itself nor any knowledge of the '*use of words*' in *itself* would be a valuable end to the question of *how words mean*—is an attitude predicated on a certain '*attention*', one unwilling to reduce '*meaning*' either to a vague abstraction or to a behaviorist, mechanical sense of its function.

To continue to develop this valuation of mediation, we should turn to Weil's *Forms of the Implicit Love of God*. This text begins with a discussion of the imperative "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God" (Matthew 22:37), in which Weil sees the inference "that the love in question is not... the love a soul can give or refuse... but... a permanent obligation" (WG 137). However, to be able to "love the Lord" implies the apprehension of God, and therefore this love

...cannot have God for its object, since God is not present to the soul and has never yet been so. It must then have another object. Yet it is destined to become the love of God.

We can call it the indirect or implicit love of God... This holds good even when the object of such love bears the name of God, for we can then say either that the name is wrongly applied or that the use of it is permissible only on account of the development bound to follow later. (WG 137)

For Weil, to speak of '*God*'²² is to use an "name" that is, necessarily, "wrongly applied" or only provisionally appropriate (137). In fact, since the love of God cannot have God for its object, what we can call the '*love of God*' is always provisional and indirect—it must have intermediaries for its object, which are only '*intermediaries*' insofar as one has faith, and therefore feels the '*love*' given to them "is destined to become the love of God" (137). Weil argues that for this focus to be provisionally appropriate, it must take "religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and our neighbor" as its object (137). The function of one's faith in these intermediaries is neither a temporally contiguous relation between them and God—that is, the

²² Interestingly, Wittgenstein also felt the name '*God*' has lost value; he wrote, at the beginning of a typescript, "I would like to say 'This book is written to the glory of God', but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood" (DG 301).

sense that God is active and present, despite and through the adulteration of those mediums—nor a plain prescription as to how one ought to behave, without any appeal as to *'why'* that behavior is necessary; instead, those intermediaries induce a feeling of unimaginable futurity, an experience of faith, as a means of *'attention'*. And this *'attention'* allows one to "give up being the center of the world in imagination, [and] discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world" (159-60). The effect of this *'attention'*, of this decentering of authority, is love as *'obedience to necessity'*, wherein one consents "to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the center of each soul," the latter being "the love of our neighbor," and the former being "love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world" (160). We are to read the order of the world as its beauty, and this beauty, like the *'good'* that Weil advocates, is only an *'intermediary'* in a certain sense; this sense is the valuation that, rather than seeing mediation as a means to an end—seeing the beauty as a means of understanding God—is instead impelled by "supernatural love... [and thereby] is able to look upon means simply as means" (N 495). The impulsion of that love is *'attention'*, which, when faced with a surface like *'beauty'* or "an absence that is felt" like the *'good'* (343), attempts to treat them neither as ends, nor as as means to end. The experience of beauty is important to both Weil and Wittgenstein, and a consideration of that experience will further develop the relation of *'means'* to our understanding of mediation.

Recall Wittgenstein's criticism of those discourses that, taking *properties* as *ingredients*, lead us to believe "we therefore could have pure beauty, unadulterated by anything that is beautiful" (BB 17). He understands the grammar of those discourses as compounding philosophical confusion, as "send[ing] us in pursuit of chimeras," of contrived *'essences'* (PI §

94). Thus we fabricate notions of "pure beauty," and depreciate that which "is beautiful" as dilutions of that purity (*BB* 17). So, how would Wittgenstein respond to the following?

With the exception of God, nothing short of the universe as a whole can with complete accuracy be called beautiful. All that is in the universe and is less than the universe can be called beautiful only if we extend the word beyond its strict limits and apply it to things that share indirectly in beauty, things that are imitations of it. (*WG* 165)

I should think Wittgenstein, in reading Weil, would have noted her arrival at "the boundary of language which stops us from asking further questions" (*DG* 301), and past which point, in religious discourse, "when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory" (305).²³ Thus, when Weil writes that beautiful things "can be called beautiful only if we extend the word beyond its strict limits," those "strict limits" are product of a technique, an activity of maintained faith in God, in "the universe as a whole" (*WG* 165). This is notably described by Weil not as *'pure'* beauty, but as "universal beauty" (165), and therefore not as something "we... could have," articulate, or fully understand (*BB* 17). Weil's understanding of *'essence'* does not involve apprehension or analysis, but faith; and this faith uses the notion of absolutes, like "universal beauty" (*WG* 165) and "the absolute good" (*N* 491), to decenter our relation to those terms. Their authority is not ours. As Weil writes of those "things that share indirectly in beauty" (*WG* 165):

Beauty is the only finality here below. As Kant said very aptly, it is a finality which involves no objective. A beautiful thing involves no good except itself, in its totality, as it appears to us. We are drawn toward it without knowing what to ask of it. It offers us its own existence. We do not desire anything else, we possess it, and yet we still desire something. We do not in the least know what it is. We want to get behind beauty, but it is only a surface. It is like a mirror that sends us back our own desire for goodness. (165-6)

²³ It is important to remember here, that much of what we cite of Weil, is from posthumously published notebooks.

It is our relation with beauty, and the *'attention'* without intent we turn upon it, that forces a reckoning with the fact that "here below there are no ends... [and] all the things we take for ends are means" (166). We want to make something of beauty, to "get behind beauty," but its surface, "like a mirror... sends us back our own desire" for that beauty to be a means for the *'good'* (166). In this way, it is like the *'good'*, for which "the absolute good lies wholly within [the] need [for the good]" (N 491); despite the fact "everything that exists here below is only a means" (167), the acknowledgement of, and attentiveness to, our need for the *'good'* in the beautiful and the beautiful in the *'good'* "sheds a luster upon them which colors them with finality," a finality founded in faith (167). That is to say, if we "look upon means simply as means" (N 495), as the *'beautiful'* and the *'good'* prompt us to do, we will no longer strive to use them to an end, and can, thereby, rest in a passive *'attention'*.

To further qualify this *'attention'*, an *'attention'* Weil describes as "suspending our thought, leaving it detached and empty" (*WG* 111), we should turn to the term's use in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Notably, Wittgenstein's use of the notion of a *'survey'* has implications for one's *'attention'*—if one cannot shed themselves of intention in analysis, if there will always be some orientation to an inquiry, then one must "approach... the same or almost the same points... afresh from different directions" (*PI* 4). While it is clear in the perspectival pluralism²⁴ he considers necessary for the *Philosophical Investigations* that Wittgenstein sees the notion of single analytical *'attention'*—both comprehensive and without self-fulfilling intent—as dubious, he nevertheless leaves open the possibility of another mode of *'attention'*, one that is decidedly not analytical:

²⁴ This notion—*'perspectival pluralism'*—will be important in discussing Woolf.

The feeling of an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain process: how come that this plays no role in reflections of ordinary life? This idea of a difference in kind is accompanied by a slight giddiness... When does this feeling occur in the present case? It is when I, for example, turn my attention in a particular way on to my own consciousness and, astonished, say to myself: "THIS is supposed to be produced by a process in the brain!" – as it were clutching my forehead. – But what can it mean to speak of "turning my attention on to my own consciousness"? There is surely nothing more extraordinary than that there should be any such thing! What I described with these words (which are not used in this way in ordinary life) was an act of gazing. I gazed fixedly in front of me – but *not* at any particular point or object. My eyes were wide open, brows not contracted (as they mostly are when I am interested in a particular object). No such interest preceded this gaze. My glance was vacant; or again, *like* that of someone admiring the illumination of the sky and drinking in the light. (§ 412)

This moment occurs in the midst of a discussion of how one attributes sensation to oneself, of how "one goes astray, because one imagines that by directing one's attention to a sensation, one is pointing at it" (§ 411). However, the process of attributing sensation to oneself is only a process of '*attribution*' when one attempt to lay it out as an analyzable '*process*'; there is no analytic action that intercedes between a sensation and the experience of that sensation as one's own.²⁵ However, the above quote is an intentional act of such interpolation, not as a means for analysis, but for the purpose of prompting a particular kind of '*attention*'; this '*attention*' is prompted by "the idea of a difference in kind" between one's "consciousness and brain process," an idea that engenders a sense of absurdity and unreality, an "astonish[ment]" at being both embodied and conscious (§ 412). And this "astonish[ment]" forces Wittgenstein to resort, not to any description of the process of "turning [one's] attention to [one's] own consciousness," as that phrase has no ordinary use, and is instead decidedly "extraordinary", but to a description of the

²⁵ That is to say, the recognition of that sensation *as* one's own is unnecessary.

physical attention that is said to accompany that process, to a description of "[vacant] gazing," without "any particular point or object" (§ 412). And, this "turning... [of] attention" demonstrates, as Wittgenstein states in the following section, neither "the meaning of the word 'self,' 'attention', or 'consciousness', nor "any analysis of such... being[s]" or conditions, "but the state of [one's] attention when [one] says" the phrase *'turning my attention on to my own consciousness'* "to [oneself]" (§ 413). Importantly, for Wittgenstein, "the state of... attention" that such a phrase prompts is described by way of simile: it is "*like* that of someone admiring the illumination of the sky and drinking in the light" (§ 412).

This passage is unusual in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as it makes a prescriptive gesture with no apparent argumentative function; Wittgenstein "did not utter the sentence," *'turning my attention on to my own consciousness'*, "in... surroundings in which it would have had an everyday and unparadoxical sense... [and], if it had been, [his] gaze would have been intent, not vacant" (§ 412). As such, one suspects that Wittgenstein did "utter the sentence" in order to highlight the possibility of a mode of *'attention'* that deviates from the *intention* in both the analytical process he decries, and in language's ordinary, context-contingent use. Both uses of language, analytical and ordinary, are undertaken in light of an "end" (*WG* 166). Importantly, the *'attention'* Wittgenstein explicates here demonstrates only a "state of attention," an *'attention'* turned upon itself and the means of its constitution. And, once turned upon itself, it is forced to resort to a sense of vacancy, which is most sufficiently described in the metaphorical terms of *'beauty'*, as looking upon the "illumination" of an empty "sky" (*PI* § 412).²⁶ Importantly, the impulse for this "turning" is an inability to comprehend "brain process" as the means of

²⁶ Wittgenstein rather rarely takes recourse to aesthetic language, which makes this passage notable.

consciousness, or "consciousness" as the end to which "brain process" operates; there is "an unbridgeable gulf between" them (§ 412). One does not mediate the other, and yet neither are ends *in themselves*—and "turning on to" this intractable relation forces the emergence of a mode of '*attention*' without "particular point or object" (§ 412). While Wittgenstein certainly felt the necessity of religious feeling, writing that "faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence" (*DG* 383), he was particularly apprehensive of applying such convictions to philosophical analysis. However, the discretion of this moment in the *Philosophical Investigations* recalls an analogy made in one of his notebooks:

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it. (464)

"His support" is faith, faith almost "[un]imaginable," and it "is possible to walk" upon this support by way of an honest, unweighted '*attention*' (464). This '*attention*' is, for Weil, the basis of sincere religious experience, as it makes no attempt to apprehend a metaphysical '*truth*' beyond the mediate world—the medium's availability is not a means to that end, and, were it used to construct such a '*truth*', it would be merely a means to another means. This '*attention*' intercedes between these means, is a "tightrope" amongst instrumentalized, dishonest expressions of the '*supernatural*' (464).

That Wittgenstein, in attempting to describe this '*attention*', makes recourse to aesthetic language, to image and simile, is significant to our literary inquiry. That '*like*'—"My glance was vacant; or again, *like* that of someone admiring the illumination of the sky"—as it mediates the miraculous absurdity of "an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain process," is an expression that elides any attempt at explicit or authoritative articulation, in favor of a figurative, relational form (*PI* § 412). It embraces a depth of experience that, were one to try and plumb it,

would lose all dimension. The decentered '*attention*' of such language is an indispensable element of literature; for Virginia Woolf, such an unweighted '*attention*' allows her narration a nimble inclusivity, as it shifts between the consciousness of multiple characters, whose experiences play out against the backdrop of this luminous, authorial '*attention*'. And in the forthcoming discussion of *To the Lighthouse*, the importance of such expressive mediation is a function not just of the narration, but of Lily Briscoe's painting; and, as we proceed to our second chapter, these expressive mediums, which allow one a heuristic method of understanding, will be of increasing significance.

Grammatical Decreation

We possess nothing in this world—for chance may deprive us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. It is that which has to be offered up to God, that is to say, destroyed. The destruction of the 'I' is the one and only free act that lies open to us. (*N* 336-7)

Weil repeatedly uses this "say[ing] 'I'" as representative of the active self,²⁷ which imposes itself between God and "all the things that [one] sees[s], hear[s], breathe[s], touch[es], eat[s], [and] all the beings that [one] meet[s]," and thereby "deprive[s] all these of contact with God and... deprive[s] God of contact with them" (378-9). It is interesting that Weil should use an act of declaration, which takes the form of the first-person, as representative of one's autonomy, and should position the renunciation²⁸ of that autonomy in the forfeiture of that "power to say 'I'" (336). It is telling, then, that Weil places so much emphasis on the imagination's ability to "arrange a whole hierarchy of values around" oneself, and illuminating to consider that the medium in which one accesses and expresses that imagination is language (*WG* 158). Therefore, one's imagination centers around their use of the first-person, as it is by that pronoun that they can grammatically give the past narrative and the future expectation, and can conflate the value of *'being'* with grammatical distance, as the distinction between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns describes how "being seems to us less and less concentrated the farther it is removed from us" (159). Recognizing this, it is a sensible decision to represent the acting, imagining self with "say[ing] 'I'" (*N* 336). And furthermore, Wittgenstein's grammatical deconstruction of the first-person pronoun, which targets solipsism and philosophical confusion, complements Weil's use of the 'I'.

²⁷ See pgs. 126, 179-80, 183, 339, 342, and 378 in *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*.

²⁸ It is also notable that Weil uses *'renunciation'*—itself a speech-act—to describe an important aspect of *'de-creation'*.

Just as our physical perspectival centering does not, for Weil, justify the metaphysical centering of ourselves, the apparent focus of the first-person pronoun corresponds, in Wittgenstein's view, to neither a substantive '*self*' nor any metaphysical agency. However, he demonstrates how philosophers have conflated the use of the first-person pronoun—of grammatical agency and authority—with metaphysical authority. Thereby, in making grammatical agency strictly *grammatical*, and demonstrating its necessity in ordinary language, Wittgenstein preserves the possibility that Weil's call for the renunciation of the ability to say 'I' is not a call to dispense with the use of that grammatical agent, but a cue to no longer conflate that grammar with metaphysical agency.

Wittgenstein has a talent for describing how grammar tempts us to construct philosophical misconceptions, while simultaneously using the ordinary use of that grammar as demonstrative of a deconstruction of those misconceptions. As he writes:

Now the idea that the real *I* lives in my body is connected with the peculiar grammar of the word "*I*", and the misunderstandings this grammar is liable to give rise to. (*BB* 66)

At the end of the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein speaks to the first-person nominative, delineating two distinct uses: "the use as object" and "the use as subject" (66). He distinguishes these two uses through "the possibility of error," wherein we might, using the first-person as an object, mistakenly attribute another's condition to ourselves. This misattribution is possible because the grammar of possession ("My arm is broken") and appearance ("I have grown six inches") involves "the recognition of a particular person," and therein allows us the potential to misrecognize ourselves (67). However, when the first-person is used as a subject, we have no such grammatical possibility; recognition is unrelated to the use of '*I*' as an agent, because, passing through the first-person into the predicate with the same immediacy as one expresses pain, one cannot misrecognize oneself—as Wittgenstein says, doing so "is as impossible... as it is

to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me" (67). Notably, this does not mean that we are unable to misconstrue the first-person's subject-use—rather, by that use, we often conflate that grammatical subject with an essential, clearly conceived *'self'*. That is, when we step away from the contemporaneousness of our ordinary use, we are liable to assume this *'I'* is demonstrative of indwelling agency, and that the *'I'* describes such. This is because, when we turn to justify, to *'lay out'* the first-person's subject-use, it appears to us that *recognition* must be an element of that use, that we must recognize ourselves as ourselves (as "a particular person") in order to that the *'I'* should refer to ourselves. We feel sure that our use of the *'I'* specifically indicates ourselves. However, something is amiss in this certainty, as Wittgenstein illustrates:

It would be wrong to say that when someone points to the sun with his hand, he is pointing both to the sun and himself because it is *he* who points; on the other hand, he may by pointing attract attention to both the sun and himself. (67)

What Wittgenstein describes here is the degree to which our language is a predicative language. While pronouns situate a grammatical subject in the context of a sentence, the pronoun *by itself* signifies very little; in fact, the discussion that precedes this in the Blue Book is that of a strict *solipsism*, which we can understand to be the philosophical position that results from misunderstanding the first-person's apparent constitution—that is, "the law of identity, 'a = a'" (66)—as experiential reality. This is to say: since I can say *I*, and since the sense of *'being'* I attach to this pronoun is not something I can recognize in another, then the use of the first-person should be restricted to myself, and only *I* possess the status of an *actual* subject. Such solipsism is the conflation of grammatical use with metaphysical authority—that is, it takes the *'I'* to ostensibly refer to an essential self, a *'thing-in-itself,'* and thereby renders the pronoun self-identical. However, in the above quote, Wittgenstein demonstrates that pronouns are not expressly used to invoke an agent. While I may, in describing something I see, "attract attention

to both" the thing indicated and myself, to say that I intended that use of the first-person to correspond with a sense of myself as a *'being with agency,'* would be incorrect. We move through such grammatical formulations as *'I see the sky is blue'*²⁹ without attributing that perception to ourselves as individuated agents, without conceiving of ourselves as beings whose specific agency enables us *'to see the sky is blue.'*

So, if we do not typically use the first-person pronoun to signify a non-grammatical, metaphysical agent, then why does it seem that an incorporeal *'being'* inheres in the *'I'* as subject? This is, again, due to "the peculiar grammar of the word *'I,'*" (66) and the preconceptions that grammar gives rise to. Since *'recognition'* is integral in the first-person's object-use, as well as in the demonstrative function of other pronouns, we are tempted, in *laying it out'*³⁰ analytically, to understand the first-person's subject-use as also involving *'recognition'*. However, as this *'recognition'* is predicated on the specificity of one's physical embodiment, *'recognition'* in the first-person's subject-use would have to be the recognition of *'myself as myself,'* and not as the particularity of my body. This makes subject-use—and, by extension, "that which has pains or sees or thinks" (74)—appear to be of another order, wholly mental, and therein metaphysical. As Wittgenstein says, "the word *'I'* in *'I have pains'* does not denote a particular body, for we can't substitute for *'I'* a description of the body" (74). And, since this sense of *'being'* inheres in the *'I,'* and since we come to belong to our use of the *'I,'* we feel that metaphysical *'being'* is bound to our physical presence, though not entirely *of* that physicality. However, this recognition of

²⁹ "When you do it spontaneously — without philosophical purposes — the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to you" (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 275, pg. 102).

³⁰ This phrase, *'laying it out'*, like *'in the mind'*, is demonstrative of grammar's capacity to prefigure spaces that are then treated as more than grammatical. As Wittgenstein writes, "You interpret a grammatical movement that you have made as a quasi-physical phenomenon which you are observing" (*PI*, § 401, pg. 128).

'*myself as myself*;' seemingly necessary in a systematized, retrospective analysis, is not truly present in our use of the first-person. We feel no aspect-perception, no figurative operation—no being '*as*' a subject—interposed between us and our employment of pronouns; I can say, '*I love you*,' without having to work through and justify the basis for my use of that grammatical subject. What happens when I say, '*I love you*,' is contemporaneous.

So, in deconstructing the first-person's ordinary use, Wittgenstein has opened another possibility to us. If, as he writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "When I think in words, I don't have 'meanings' in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather language itself is the vehicle of thought" (*PI* § 329), then the use of pronouns can "express the relationships between things," without collapsing those relationships into the mere exercise of metaphysical agency (*N* 154). Therefore, '*de-creation*' need not abandon the grammatical agent, just its imaginary, metaphysical referent.

Still, the desire to distance oneself from the representative '*I*' is not isolated to religious mystics—there is something of this impulse in the author of fiction, who, by providing intimate access to multiple points-of-view, deconstructs the conflation of the value of '*being*' with grammatical distance, and complicates the correspondence between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns and the diminishing "concentrat[ion]" of '*being*,' as it is grammatically "removed from us" (*WG* 159). Literature allows us to experience the value and valuations of disparate states of consciousness, across a distance we habitually use to distinguish degrees of significance. These complications predominate in the perspectival pluralism of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and, as we continue to the second chapter, it is one's attitude towards distant others that invites ethical comparisons.

Mediation, Attention, and the Supernatural

Some condensation of this comparative study is necessary, as is a gesture towards our trajectory; of principle importance is how one orients oneself in regards to an available medium. In this respect, we have described two attitudes—one, which sees the medium as displaying and, by the terms of that display, diluting the energy of a distant and inaccessible source, and another, which sees the medium itself as constitutive of one's experience of depth, the depth which would hold such a *'source'*. And it is in the latter attitude that we have interpreted Simone Weil, and have emphasized what appears to be a certain mysticism in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Furthermore, we have made the argument that such an experience of mediation—one that would be inclusive of the *'supernatural'*, of the miraculous—is predicated on an *'attention'* without intent. However, we have not yet sufficiently characterized such *'attention'*, as involves one's perception and experience; to address this, our second chapter is concerned with Weil's concept of *'reading'* and Wittgenstein's notion of *'aspect-perception'*, as implicates the narrative style of Virginia Woolf and an association between aesthetics and ethics. In this association, Weil's understanding of value—which rejects the citation of metaphysical principles, while decentering one's sense of epistemic authority—recurs, in order to ground our discussion of how dimensional relations can be an orienting ethic.

Chapter Two

*Weil's Concept of 'Reading', Wittgenstein's Aspect-Perception, and Aesthetics as Ethics:
Woolf's Narrative Style as a Mode of Ethics*

In turning from Wittgenstein and Weil to Virginia Woolf, we must address the suspicion with which Weil viewed literature—she understood literature as primarily an exercise of a compensatory imagination, which both fictionalizes one's experience and discourages an open 'attention'.³¹ While there are biographical similarities—both were women, both suffered invisible ailments³²—and while Woolf, as the authorial 'genius' and tragic suicide, is subject to a similar cultural warp,³³ we cannot assume that that these similarities indicate an intellectual affinity. Rather, in this chapter, we will first turn to Woolf's criticism, as the values evidenced by her critique of Frederic Harrison demonstrate such an affinity. More important, however, is that Weil's concept of 'reading' and Wittgenstein's investigation of 'aspect-perception' allow us to understand the narrative style of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as developing a mode of ethics, predicated on a comparison of the techniques by which characters experience one another and the world, and of the effect of these techniques on their interpersonal relations. And, interestingly, it increasingly appears that one's 'faith' in the depth of another's experience is intimately related to the ability to see the world's existence as miraculous.

³¹ As she wrote, "Morals and Literature—Because the link is missing, the result is that our real life is more than three parts composed of imagination and fiction" (*N* 355).

³² Woolf, in all likelihood, had an undiagnosed, untreated bipolar disorder, which, while culminating in her suicide, quite likely contributed to the breadth and generosity of her narration, and Weil's chronically "poor state of health, her perpetual struggles with headaches, and the fact that she had very little energy at her disposal," while physically limiting, became a wellspring of spiritual potency (Pétrement, *L* 28).

³³ *Virginia Woolf Icon* by Brenda R. Silver documents this iconography of Woolf.

In a 1941 letter to the journal *Cahiers du Sud*, titled *On the Responsibilities of Literature*, Weil states her belief "that writers of the present time are responsible for the misfortune of our time" (*LPW* 151), explaining that their "indifference to [a] sense of value," which is manifest in their diction, has led to the degradation of those "words that are within the moral space of good and evil," giving them "a bastard sense" (153). This is significant, as "language does not give us any other resources to praise a person's character," and therefore, "what has happened to words renders sensible the progressive vanishing of the concept of value" (153). While this, at a glance, might appear to be dismissive of Weil's contemporaries, the modernists,³⁴ and supportive of more culturally conservative forms of literature, she finishes her letter by declaring:

To be sure, there is something even more foreign to good and evil than amorality, and that is a certain kind of morality. Those who are currently putting the blame on famous writers are worth infinitely less than they, and the "moral reorientation" that certain people would like to impose would be much worse than the state of things that they are pretending to remedy. If our present suffering ever does lead to a moral reorientation, it will not be accomplished by slogans, but in silence and moral solitude, through pain, misery, terror, in the deepest part of each spirit. (154)

At this time, Weil, a woman of Jewish ancestry, had fled Nazi-occupied Paris for the south of France. Her concerns were evidenced by the world around her, by a context rife with ideology, propaganda, and their resulting violence—hence her denunciation of a morality peddled in "slogans" (154). Having, at one time, been a Marxist, her notion of '*necessity*' is consonant with a materialist view of history; this, roughly, holds that a society's formulation of morality is a consequence of its material conditions, rather than understanding those material conditions as dependent upon a society's morality. This contextualizes her conviction that, if societal conditions are not conducive to a heightened morality, and an adjustment cannot be "imposed,"

³⁴ She does specifically indict the post-modern Dadaists and surrealists.

then the process of moral "reorientation" must take the form of "silence and moral solitude," and be sought "in the deepest part of each spirit" (154). As we have seen, it is in the '*de-creation*' enabled by suffering without consolation that, for Weil, one becomes able to experience—as an "absence that is felt" (N 343)—'*supernatural*' value. Perhaps counterintuitively, there is ample reason to suggest Virginia Woolf held compatible views of '*moral*' literature, as her writings manifest certain evaluations of "character" made from a place of solitary suffering (LPW 153).

It is Woolf's criticism of Frederic Harrison, a self-described positivist who took issue with literary modernism, that most obviously evidences her affinity with Weil's *Responsibilities of Literature*. As she writes in the 1919 essay, *A Positivist*, Harrison has "given us the impression that somewhere about the middle of the last century Truth opened her lips and spoke her secrets to a little group of which he is now the only survivor" (EVW v.3 64). In order to contextualize Woolf's choice of title, we should note that '*positivism*'³⁵ is the theory that true knowledge is empirically verifiable, composed solely of positive facts, and is therefore constituted by the application of logic to sensory experience. As an attitude towards literature, it would appear to be the alignment of sensory experience with logic,³⁶ dismissive of unverifiable, individual experiences involving intuition or impression (hence, Harrison reads only "what deals with the war or [the] standard literature of the old immortals" 64). As such, Woolf lambasts Harrison's

³⁵ Notably, Wittgenstein's early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was a work of logical positivism; in this, it was asserted that ethical or religious—and therein metaphysical—claims were propositions without logical sense, and therefore were meaningless. However, Wittgenstein's attitude towards religion and ethics was decidedly different than "that of a positivist anti-metaphysician," stating, in a lecture given in November 1929, that expressions of such are "document[s] of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and [that] I would not for my life ridicule" (DG 277).

³⁶ And, if the internal logic of a piece of literature is constituted chiefly by its literary criticism, then Woolf's note that contemporary authors "must be content to forgo authoritative criticism until they are long past the age at which they can profit from it," suggests that literature cannot, or should not, be strictly '*positivist*' (*The Claim of the Living*, from EVW v.2 257).

definition of religion as the "continuous communion of soul with those of a like mind who are working out their duty in the eye and with the help of Providence" (66); she takes exception to the phrase "of a like mind," belittling, "the belief that... one mind about moral and spiritual purposes... is the right one" (66). Woolf holds Harrison in particular disdain; it seems probable that this disdain is informed by Woolf's experience with mental illness, which, from a Harrison's perspective, could generate no '*verifiable*', and thereby no meaningful, knowledge. Instead, his perspective takes a neutral, unscribed position for granted, a position at once masculine, colonial, and neurotypical; Harrison certainly does not invoke a "communion of soul" with the expectation of communing with mentally ill women or, for that matter, anyone exterior to an empirical, neutral position—anyone unwilling or unable to assume their "duty in the eye... of Providence" (66). Therefore, his attitude towards the experience of others is likened to "the arrogance of a judge rather than the more valuable insight of a fellow sinner" (65). The morality Harrison espouses is that which Woolf and Weil disparage, that morality "even more foreign to good and evil than amorality" (*LPW* 154), whereby even his little "ironies about... the manners of young woman on omnibuses" (*EVW* v.3 64), belie the empirical, masculine standard he would like to "impose" (*LPW* 154) upon them. In Weil's words, the authoritative '*good*' Harrison promotes is the "good [that] as the opposite of evil is, in a sense, equivalent to [evil]" (*N* 127); the examples she gives for this equivalence are "theft and the bourgeois respect for property, adultery and the 'respectable woman'; the savings bank and waste; lying and 'sincerity'" (127). For her, these things exist upon the same moral level. Since the '*good*' and '*evil*' of these are opposed, interdependent products of a capitalistic, misogynistic cultural imagination, the integrity of such oppositions exists only for those of "a like mind," and in the projected "eye of

Providence" (*EVW* v.3 66). Woolf's dismissal of Harrison evidences an affinity between Woolf and Weil's moral critiques.

For Woolf, these critiques extend to her fiction; we find a resemblance to Mr. Harrison in Mr. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* and in Sir William Bradshaw of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Rather than denouncing these characters outright in moralizing diction or narration, Woolf renders them in their personal relationships; this decision allows the characters themselves to evidence their emotional and experiential incapacities, and demonstrates how these incapacities, which strain those relationships, proceed from obstinate personal morals or philosophies. Since these appraisals are accomplished through the implicit comparisons Woolf's narration intimates, and since analysis of such comparisons necessitates an examination of her narrative style, our discussion of her novel-length fiction will come later on. However, Woolf's 1917 short story, *The Mark on the Wall*, provides us with a condensed monologue with the same concerns, and therefore puts forth an explicit critique of such moral and philosophical certainty.

In *The Mark on the Wall*, our narrator stares, immobile, at an ambiguous, not-quite-circular, dark shape upon a white wall, musing at length upon the character of certainty, before she declares:

And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really – what shall I say? – the head of a gigantic old nail... what should I gain?

Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? (*CSF* 81)

Notably, our narrator is never roused from her seat, spending the entirety of the story, one which exceeds three-thousand words, in quiet contemplation of this mark—and this "train of thought," without attempting to define or verify its object, proves generative, binding disparate imaginings, perceptions, and concerns into a nexus of phrase and image (82); all by virtue of the narrator's

willingness to not only permit, but to fully unfold her own ambivalence,³⁷ while simultaneously evaluating the tension between that permissance and the urge to authoritative certainty. The reflexive question, "what shall I say?" demonstrates our narrator's awareness of the aleatory quality of her inquiry, and, by disallowing a fixation on any single possibility, enables this piece of fiction to take form (81).

It is this elliptical form that puts forth, alongside imaginings of "a world... [in] which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies" (81), a cogent social critique of a manner of philosophical logic, wherein "what takes the place of" the reality of "Sunday luncheons... walks, country houses, and tablecloths" is "men, perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard" (80). The unreality of such things, to which Woolf eludes, is the product of the brand of philosophy that, so certain of its method and standard, can put even the prospect of future sunrises into doubt.³⁸ Furthermore, it bears some resemblance to the method that, in *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay practices. When Lily Briscoe asks Andrew Ramsay about the nature of his father's work, he simply states, "Subject and object and the nature of reality," and to her professed ignorance, elaborates, "Think of a kitchen table then... when you're not there" (*TL* 23). When one insists on the dominance of a narrow strain of philosophical logic over the plurality of ordinary perception, that which "a kitchen table" is, is abstracted; implicit in Andrew's explanation is the authority inherited from his father, an authority which holds that the table's ordinary permanence is merely a medium for, and can be reduced to, a proposition of platonic *essence*; thereby it is the shadow of a metaphysical standard, available only as an object of one's

³⁷ Ambivalence towards her own authority and certainty—not moral ambivalence.

³⁸ See Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, Ch. 6, *On Induction*.

mind. As to emphasize just how absurd such a proposition can appear in the practice of ordinary life, Lily Briscoe, for whom the table was explained as an object of the mind, demonstrates a laudable flippancy—she sees this table, specifically, "lodged now in the fork of a pear tree, for they had reached the orchard" (*TL* 23). Lily becomes, in this passage, an instrument of the critique Woolf began in *The Mark on the Wall*.

It is Mr. Ramsay's "seeing of angular essences" (*TL* 23), his reducing of the ordinary to something of metaphysical authority, accessible only to the empirical intellect, in a process of unsparing certainty, that *The Mark on the Wall* speaks against. Looking at the mark on the wall,³⁹ our narrator expresses relief, and "a satisfying sense of reality" (*CSF* 82). She continues, saying,

Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours. (82)

Woolf gives her narrator a reverence for "the impersonal world," a world that reminds her of the unreality, not of "tablecloths" and "kitchen table[s]," but of human "dream[s] of horror" and that contrived logic (82), which is able to reduce a kitchen table to a "phantom" (*TL* 23). And this reverence, which finds meaning in the ordinary experience of things *as* things, not as constituents of a logical economy of significance, is demonstrative of a precept Weil insists upon. As Weil wrote, "it is things qua values which are unreal for us... but false values also take away reality from perception itself, owing to the imagination which cloaks it" (*N* 553). Weil speaks of "things [as] values" to implicate the unreality fabricated by the "imagination," as it is assigning value to things—as one does in analytical logic, wherein a thing's value is contingent upon its relation to an overarching, schematic explanation—that manufactures "illusions" (553). For both Woolf and

³⁹ Because to what Platonic form could an ambiguous mark on the wall correspond?

Weil, metaphysical "values are not deduced" but produced (553)—and, as Weil uses the absence of 'good' as an instrumental vacancy, in order to perform an inversion that makes "everything which exists" (491), and which we "ma[ke]e sensible" (422), appear comparatively unreal, so Woolf uses "the chest of drawers" to divest us of the masculine, metaphysical standard, as the narrator's "worshipping... [of] the drawers" becomes the worship of "the impersonal world other than ours," a world decidedly not Platonic, instead "solid... [and] real" (*CSF* 82). The narrator of *The Mark on the Wall* is ambivalent, but her ambivalence is oriented towards the authority of produced values, to that which appears unreal when compared to the "impersonal... existence" of the drawers (82). She is not ambivalent to that which renders those produced values unreal, and instead affirms something 'supernatural' about "the chest of drawers" (82), just as Weil directs her desire for absolute value to the 'good', which "represents for us a nothingness" (*N* 491). To further qualify this attitude, I suggest we turn to Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's critique of exemplary metaphors as limiting one to the particular semantics of that metaphor is helpful here; as he writes, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the main cause of philosophical confusion is "a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (*PI* § 164). Rather than fixating, and accruing the bias of that fixation, Woolf's narrator uses an ambivalent imagination⁴⁰ to decenter or deconstruct those sign-systems that are properly "imaginary" in Weil's view. As Weil asserts, in order "to try to love without imagining... to love the appearance [of the world] in its nakedness without interpretation" (*N* 273), we must "attach... elevated tendencies to low object[s]" (123). By "worshipping... some existence other

⁴⁰ This 'imagination' is not constructive—that is, it does not construct illusion. In fact, the imagination in *The Mark on the Wall* reads similarly to the philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*, in that it refuses authoritative statements, paradigmatic metaphors, and instead presents the reader with a kind of 'survey', by which one can chart the impulse to definitively name the mark—its narrative bears similarities to Wittgenstein's 'therapeutic' method.

than ours" through the medium of a "chest of drawers," our narrator exercises a sense of divinity independent of both the masculine standard, and of the personal or cultural significance of the "drawers" themselves (*CSF* 82); the narrator, furthermore, resists the temptation to make these "drawers" paradigmatic—therein resisting the urge to clothe the world's "nakedness" in interpretation or imagination—by immediately moving to survey the "pleasant[ness]" of wood, then to the temporality of trees, and, from there, onto the non-human inhabitants of rivers, loosely assembling the resemblances of these as they relate to "some existence other than ours" (82). In doing so, Woolf demonstrates a positive affinity with Weil, and, without the use of any moralizing diction or orthodox structure, involves values central to Weil's religious philosophy.

This, of course, contradicts Weil's assertion that "language does not give us any other resources to praise a person's character," (*LPW* 154) other than those words that denote moral values. In the context of that piece of criticism, *On the Responsibilities of Literature*, this proposition narrows her argument, allowing her to call attention to the gradual degradation of those words, rather than faulting the authors of her present; this thereby distinguishes her from "those who are currently putting the blame on famous writers," and who, she argues, "are worth infinitely less than [those authors]" (154). However, this is an unequivocal assertion, and, removed from the context of that critique, it appears that Weil's own concept of '*reading*', put forth in the largely finished *Essay on the Concept of Reading*, would provide a further resource with which a modernist author—no longer trafficking in "bastard[ized]" moral diction—could, if

not explicitly praise, then implicitly evaluate the "character" of the personae that compose their narrative (153).⁴¹

Weil's concept of '*reading*', while using the act of reading to demonstrate how the interpretation of a sign becomes, without any intervening delay, an experience of its meaning, is nonetheless distinct from a traditional semiotics⁴² by the advantage of its analogy; by situating the manner in which "meanings... tak[e] possession of [one's] soul and shap[e] it from one moment to the next" in the frame of '*reading*', Weil allows a far more flexible and collocating understanding, wherein we cannot speak of the appearance of signs prior to our experiencing their significance, as "what does appear is something else that is related to appearances as a phrase is related to letters" (24).⁴³ One can read *To the Lighthouse* as a study in this '*reading*'; what the lighthouse *is* for James is the aspect of the lighthouse that orients him, that has significance; he experiences the lighthouse *as* his "looking forward" (*TL* 3) to the Lighthouse. He experiences it in the aspect of his expectation, and so the structure appears in the novel *as* being of the condition of the collocating, phrasal organization: '*to the Lighthouse*'. As we continue into an account of Weil's essay, this analogy, that of the '*phrase*', should remind us of her affinities with Wittgenstein, and will go on to help us understand the bearing that '*reading*' has in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

⁴¹ Woolf was committed to an understanding of literature as related to '*character*', writing, in her criticism of Clayton Hamilton, "...learning from books is a capricious business at best... in the end, far from calling books either 'romantic' or 'realistic', you will be more inclined to think them, as you think people, very mixed, very *distinct*, very unlike one another" (44, *EVW* v.3).

⁴² Such as that of Charles Sanders Peirce, a contemporary, of whom Weil wouldn't have know, but whose tripartite formulation of 'sign relation' is a far more schematic and orthodox philosophical formulation.

⁴³ Compare with Weil's attitude towards philosophical precepts, discussed in our first chapter.

Weil begins this essay by distinguishing those sensations that "come from outside us," in which "the mind does not play any part... except to submit," from "the thoughts that we ourselves form," but by which "we are not seized... in the same way" (*LPW* 22). These sensations in question are further specified; she is not describing the sensation of physical pain, of "a punch in the stomach," but "those sensations that are pretty much insignificant in themselves, [and] yet, by what they signify, what they mean, they seize us in the same way" (22). Weil offers the example of "two women each receiv[ing] a letter saying that her son is dead," (22) wherein one can read, and the other cannot. Those letters on the page—significant only by the practices that have allowed one woman fluency—impart pain with the same immediacy as physical sensation. She goes on to write:

Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were, by meanings that *we ourselves* read in appearances. That is why we can argue endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were external; *that is real*... [And] what is peculiar here is that what we are given is not sensations *and* meanings; what we read is alone what is given... It is impossible not to read; we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand... and not read it. (22-3)

We should note Weil's employment of a Cartesian boundary that divides inside from "outside," and girds the possibility of "argu[ing]... about the unreality of the external world" (22); however, it is not this division that opens that "external world" to doubt, but "the meanings that we... read in appearances" and conflate with the "reality of the external world" (22). She qualifies that our "read[ings]" are not real, but the immediacy with which they affect our experience "is real" (22). And, for Weil, the experience of that significance is related to one's character, by virtue of the fact that "*we ourselves*" are those who "read," and who can affect that act, even if our '*reading*' is inevitable (22). This capacity "to change the meanings that [one] read[s] in appearances," though

"limited, indirect, and... requir[ing] work" (26), is the capacity that is, for Weil, most demonstrative of one's moral character. This difference in the meanings that one *'reads'* is not akin to changing a word's referent; rather it is dependent upon the collocating power of "phrases," whose grammar, like melody,⁴⁴ compels a certain organization and continuity.⁴⁵ That this is effectively demonstrative of moral character is, for Weil, precisely because it is both dependent and independent of the person; it depends upon how an act "will seem to" them, and yet, is independent of their autonomy. That is, if a man has learned to *'read'* the possibility of kindness in any circumstance, he will not choose between being kind or callous, but will *'read'* possible kindnesses as salient necessities, entirely "despite himself" (27). Still, this sense of necessity is contingent upon the ability of *'reading'* to place an action's "value... in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good" (27). And, in the difference between two *'readings'*, one valued as beautiful and good, the other as ugly and immoral, is "a technique that would allow one to pass from one reading to another" (27). Here is where Weil concludes her essay, though she notably "had plans to expand it at some future date" (21), leaving her reader with the open question of that *'technique'*. One possibility, and the possibility into which I will inquire, is that certain narrative devices, such as free-indirect discourse and a multiple-point-of-view stream-of-consciousness, can demonstrate an implicit evaluation of a literary persona's "character" (154), by means of how that persona *'reads'* the world around them; these evaluations, as they move

⁴⁴ This is to speak to a self-organizing principle in music—when one hears a note that is off-beat or off-key, one does not need a background in music theory to recognize that note as incongruous, as unrelated "to truth and beauty as well as to the good" (27). As Wittgenstein asks and answers, "What does someone who senses the solemnity of a melody perceive? Nothing that could be conveyed by repetition" (*PPF* §233).

⁴⁵ As Woolf puts it, "a little shape of some kind builds itself up" (*EVW* v.3 44).

between contrasting personae and through time, will perhaps provide insight on a *'technique'* that allows one to affect their reading of the world.

Before proceeding any further, we should note the importance of *'mediation'* in Weil's concept of *'reading'*, as concerns the *'technique'* "that would allow one to pass from one reading to another" (27). Her insistence that "we are given... not sensations *and* meanings; what we read is alone what is given" (23), calls to mind Wittgenstein's conviction that "when I think in words, I don't have 'meanings' in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather language itself is the vehicle of thought" (*PI* § 113). Both philosophers argue for the primacy of the medium, and, as a result of this mediation, our ability to affect the meanings we *'read'* is indirect, is the ability to affect the medium of our *'reading'*. And the metaphor Wittgenstein employs to describe the relation between language and meaning—that "language itself is the *vehicle* of thought" (§ 113. *emph. added*)—has a counterpart in Weil's characterization of the capacity to "change the meanings that [one] read[s] in appearances" (*LPW* 26). As she writes:

However, this power is also limited, indirect, and it, too, requires work. Labor in the normal sense of the word is an example of this work because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is an apprenticeship in reading... For the sailor, for the experienced captain, his boat has become in a sense an extension of his own body; it is an instrument by which to read the tempest, and he reads it very differently than a passenger does. (26)

Both philosophers understanding meaning as constituted by its medium, by vehicles that, in mediating something vast, indeterminate, and incomprehensible—*'thought'* for Wittgenstein and the metaphoric *'tempest'* for Weil—enable us to perceive some significance within such, and thereby orient ourselves. It is by working with those mediums, which present us with such significance, that one alters their *'reading'* of the world; of course, our ability to do so is "limited

[and] indirect," because we cannot labor upon *'thought'* itself, or the *'tempest'* itself, but only upon the instruments that allow us to make sense of those. As we have seen, this sentiment informs Wittgenstein's *'therapeutic'* philosophical method, wherein one is made to consider with the sundry ways in which language *means*, without ever receiving authoritative statements on *what* language means—that *what* is understood to be illusory. The effect of that method enables his reader to perceive "resources for escaping" those philosophical confusions produced by the misunderstanding of terms, such as *'thought'* and *'meaning'*, just as the boat enables its captain to "read necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping, and an obligation to be courageous and honorable" (26) in a seemingly interminable tempest. Importantly, this mode of heuristic mediation—which, like Wittgenstein's use of simile in § 412 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, allows one to perceive relational significance—is distinct from a perception of the physical world as a medium for the metaphysical; such an understanding of mediation imagines a singular and ultimate source that pervades the medium, while this mode makes the wide and formless meaningful. As we continue, we will explore the implications of this relational, heuristic technique of mediation for art, literature, and the experience of the miraculous.

The question of *how one reads the world*, of course, makes one think of psychology; and indeed, why should we favor literature above psychoanalysis, if we are looking for a technique "that would allow one to pass from one reading to another[?]" (27). The lectures Wittgenstein gave on the philosophy of psychology, at Cambridge in 1945, may furnish us with an answer.

In these lectures, Wittgenstein draws a particular puzzle out of psychology's frequent definition, which he argues is "the science of Mental Phenomena" (*DG* 500). The difficulty in this, is that what one means by *'mental'* phenomena involves both a comparison with, and a

contrast against, what the term '*phenomena*' typically denotes; and Wittgenstein posits that, if what one means by '*mental phenomena*' is "thinking, deciding, wishing, desiring, [and] wondering" (500), then it is nonsensical to speak of these phenomena in the same terms as one speaks of physical phenomena, of thermal expansion, magnetism, glaciers, etc. And furthermore, how one observes '*mental phenomena*' raises additional questions:

So where is the science of mental phenomena? Answer: You observe your own mental happenings. How? By introspection. But if you observe, i.e., if you go about to observe your own mental happenings you alter them and create new ones: and the whole point of observing is that you should not do this—observing is supposed to be just the thing that avoids this. Then the science of mental phenomena has this puzzle: I can't observe the mental phenomena of others and I can't observe my own, in the proper sense of 'observe'. So where are we? (500)

Of course, this concluding question wryly intimates where we are: in the '*fly-bottle*'. An empirical, scientific paradigm tempts us to imagine that tinkering with variables, "accumulat[ing]... more data" through further analysis, or formulating a new "*theory* of thinking" could clarify what the '*observation of mental phenomena*' means (500). Instead, Monk writes, tacitly gesturing to sections 421 through 693 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, "the only thing capable of clearing the fog is a conceptual investigation, an analysis of the use of words like 'intention', 'willing', 'hope' etc., which shows that these words gain their meaning from a form of life, a 'language-game', quite different from that of describing and explaining physical phenomena" (501). We have already described the method that presents us with a morphology⁴⁶ of those grammatical expressions, as that is the methodology of the *Philosophical Investigations*; however, the point we failed to explicate is the apposite relation of literature to this morphology.

⁴⁶ Notably, Wittgenstein borrowed this notion of 'morphology' from Goethe's *Die Metamorphose der Pflanze*.

While psychology is often thrall to misapplied scientific paradigms, literature's concern with experience is responsible only to the variable expressions of experience—that is, literature is able to "observe... mental happenings" without subscribing to any "proper sense of 'observ[ation]'," and therefore does not reify the notion of a neutral observer (500). Literature embraces the fact that, in experience, one is often "observ[ing] [one's] own mental happenings," and thereby "alter[ing] them and creat[ing] new ones" (500). The interrelation of one's experience and the interpretation of that experience is foregrounded in narrative styles like free-indirect discourse, and the primacy of this interrelation emphasizes that language is a "form of life" (*PI* § 23). And this interrelation renders these variables inextricable from one another—recall the metaphor of '*breath*' and '*body*' employed in our first chapter—and, as we turn from Wittgenstein's discussion of '*aspect-perception*' and artistic representation in part *XI* of *Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment* to his discussion of religious language in his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*, we will look to how an acknowledgement of this interrelation describes a possible means of "pass[ing] from one reading to another" (*LPW* 27).

In discussing '*aspect-perception*', Wittgenstein first establishes that there are objects of our experience that we do not interpret, writing, "It would have made... little sense for me to say, 'Now I see it as...' as to say at the sight of a knife and fork" (*PPF* §122). This is to say, similar to Weil's description of '*reading*', no interpretative agency intervenes when we see a metal utensil with four tines and experience it as a '*fork*'; rather, that experience evidences a kind of semiotic fluency. However, in cases of more complexity—Wittgenstein's go-to example is the ambiguous '*duck-rabbit*' drawing, which can be seen *as* either duck or rabbit—we can experience the "lighting up" of an aspect (§ 129), which may be occasioned by an interpretative act, an expression of a change of aspect. In the case of the '*duck-rabbit*', when one first sees the

drawing, and says, "It's a rabbit," that is "the report of a perception" (§ 128); however, if one originally saw a duck, and says, "Now it's a rabbit," that is more than merely a correction or report—it is such an expression of a change of aspect (§ 128).⁴⁷ As such, Wittgenstein describes "two uses of the word 'see'" (§ 111). The first, "I see *this*," is expressive of what occurs when we see a fork; the second, "I see a likeness in these" (§ 111), is relational, and expresses what we experience when the '*duck-rabbit*' drawing changes in aspect, as well as what occurs when we '*recognize*' someone. That is, if I do not recognize an old friend, then what I see is unfamiliar face; but if they greet me, I may suddenly see this unfamiliar face transfigured in aspect, illuminated by familiarity—suddenly, I see my friend. But, as the face is not materially altered between these experiences, "the expression of a change of aspect is an expression of a *new* perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception" (§ 130). It is for this reason that Wittgenstein notes, "the lighting up of an aspect seems half visual experience, half thought" (§ 140). '*Aspect-perception*' illustrates the inseparable plait of experience and interpretation,⁴⁸ which, while explicit in changes of aspect, is nonetheless unconsciously consequential in even the most banal and unremarkable perceptions, like that of a '*fork*'.

Notably, visual art operates both implicitly and explicitly on this basis; while we are aware of the representative, conceptual aspect that shapes our experience of an art-object—we

⁴⁷ Similarly, Weil writes that, "If at night, on a lonely road, I think I see a man waiting in ambush instead of what is actually a tree, it is a human and menacing presence that forces itself upon me... There is not an appearance *and* then an interpretation; a human presence has penetrated to my soul through my eyes, and now, just as suddenly, the presence of a tree" (*LPW* 23).

⁴⁸ It is useful for this argument to state their interrelation positively, as the interaction of two variables; this, however, is not entirely in keeping with Wittgenstein's ethos, as it would be more honest to argue that what we call '*experience*' and '*interpretation*' is just an illusory, abstracted dichotomy, the sincere use of which confines itself to a narrow '*language-game*'. As he goes on to write, "Is [the lighting up of an aspect] looking + thinking? No. Many of our concepts *cross* here" (§ 245).

are cognizant of the medium—we still "view the photograph, the picture on our walls, as the very object (the man, landscape, and so on) represented in it" (§ 197). The medium displays that implicit fluency. Important in this fluency is the perception of "organizational aspects," wherein, if one sees a new relation in shape and color, then "the aspect changes, [and] parts of the picture belong together which before did not" (§ 220). The capacity to experience those aspects as "belong[ing] together" (§ 220), whether immediate or following a prompted reorganization, is an experience "the substratum of [which] is the mastery of technique" (§ 222). To illustrate this experience:

I see that an animal in a picture is transfixed by an arrow. It has struck it in the throat, and sticks out at the back of the neck. Let the picture be a silhouette. – Do you *see* the arrow – or do you merely *know* that these two bits are supposed to represent part of an arrow?
(§ 180)

Caught between this opposition of '*seeing*' and '*knowing*', we hesitate to say we "*see* the arrow," as what we see are the colors and shapes constitutive of an image; and if we said that we should '*see*' the arrow, were it not *obscured* by the animal's body, we would be tacitly endorsing the possibility of the arrow's reveal, as if we could pull an image from a corpse, or an arrow from an image (§ 180). But we are not inclined to say we '*know*' that those "two bits are supposed to represent... an arrow" either, as if their placement were an intentional operation of signs, which corresponds to, and results in, the signifier: '*arrow*' (§ 180). Rather, we do not fixate on that arrow alone; we do not feel called upon to isolate and justify our claim to the descriptive use of the word '*arrow*', and the picture is not allowed to be a simple "silhouette" (§ 180). What we perceive is an image of "an animal... transfixed by an arrow" (§ 180); we experience a "belong[ing] together" (§ 220), a transfixation, from which neither '*arrow*' nor '*animal*' can be sensibly separated. We are struck by the image in its '*organizational aspect*', which gives us that

interpenetration in three-dimensions. And furthermore, we have a sense of rupture, of unreal temporality; if prompted, we would say the arrow "*has struck [the animal] in the throat, and sticks out at the back of the neck*" (§ 180, *emph. added*). It is such a response that, as Wittgenstein says, "convinces us that someone is seeing the drawing three-dimensionally," as they display "a certain kind of '*knowing one's way about*': certain gestures, for instance, which indicate the three-dimensional relations – fine shades of behavior" (§ 180). One could equate this seeing of dimension, which is evidenced by one's ability to move within its relations, to the development of a kind of affective proprioception. And, I argue, this experience of dimension, when compared with the use of religious language, is related to the experience of the '*supernatural*', and illuminates the '*attention*' and '*faith*' required for such an experience.

The experience of relational depth in an image or painting is not reducible to empirical perception or knowledge, but is, instead, the exercise of an experiential technique. Similarly, Wittgenstein, in his *Lecture on Ethics*, argues that "all religious terms... [are] used as similes or allegorically" (*LE* 4), and that when, in those religious expressions, "we try to drop the simile and simply... state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts," and no describable experience (5). His primary example is the phrase, "I wonder at the existence of the world" (4); to express this condition of '*wonder*' is to use the word, '*wonder*', figuratively, since "to say 'I wonder at such and such being the case' only has sense if I can imagine it not to be the case," as it is when one "wonder[s] at the existence of... a house when one sees it and has not visited for a long time and... imagined that it had been pulled down in the meantime (4). Therefore, he argues that, since "one cannot imagine [the world] not existing," one must be expressing something figurative, speaking *as if* one could imagine that the world did not exist. It is, as he says, "the experience of seeing the world *as* a miracle" (5). This perception of the

miraculous, like that of an '*organizational aspect*' in art, is dependent upon a technique, upon what—following Weil—we will call '*attention*' or '*faith*'; for, if one subjects that same world to a different technique, then whatever miraculous dimension was felt before, now appears as a baseless illusion, just as one can view the depth of a painting as a mere visual device, a trick.⁴⁹ That view, which would understand religious expression as nonsensical and would insist that painted depth is deception, is an attitude produced by the misapplication of a scientific paradigm. Methods derived from that paradigm are predicated on the apprehension of objects both empirical and epistemological; and if we attempt to grasp a painted apple, or try to pull the arrow from that "animal... transfixed" (*PPF* §180), we will encounter only medium, only paint and canvas. The frustration produced by such an attempt is illustrated by Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*, as he tries apprehend and articulate the essence of religious expression—this attempted apprehension is, he argues, an attempt to "go beyond the world and... beyond [logically] significant language," and will therefore "run [up] against the boundaries of language" (*LE* 6). But, when we maintain both distance and an open '*attention*', when we try neither to grasp the painted apple nor to plumb the depth of the miraculous, we can experience that depth and dimension; and what halts our impulse towards apprehension, what stays our desire to hold and to understand, is '*faith*'.

As Weil wrote, "the good represents for us a nothingness," as the "absolute good lies wholly in... [our] need for the good" (*N* 491). In the first chapter, we noted that, if the '*good*' were apprehended and our need for the '*good*' satisfied, then that satisfaction would nullify the that which constitutes our experience of the '*good*'. As such, the value of the '*good*' consist only

⁴⁹ Unlike St. Thomas, '*Doubting Thomas*', Christ will not come to us and invite us to place our fingers in his wounds, to measure the depth of his divinity (see John 20:24-29, or Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*). Our incredulousness must not be that crude contestation of doubt.

in the *'faith'* we have that such "nothingness" is not "unreal," a *'faith'* that sees the *'good'*, by virtue of its absence in our means of representation, as itself representative of the limits of those means (491). Therefore, when Weil writes that a certain technique, a particular mode of "reading puts [us] in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good," I suggest that we understand such a *'reading'* not as the direct discernment of that tripartite value,⁵⁰ as one would discern a bird among brambles (*LPW* 27); instead, by placing us "in relation" to such value, such a *'reading'* situates us in a dimension, an internal relationality that compels our actions to be congruent with beauty and the *'good'*. This is, in part, because that faculty itself, by which one perceives depth, is evidenced only, as Wittgenstein says, by "a certain kind of *'knowing one's way about'*... certain gestures for instance, which indicate... three-dimensional relations" (*PPF* § 180). To see such dimension is akin to a kind of proprioception, wherein one's movements are held necessarily in relation to one's sense of oneself within space.

Furthermore, that *'faith'*, which allows one to experience the depth and internal relations of both religious expression and a painting, is also important in *'reading'* others; rather than "let[ting] [another] be a silhouette," rather than allowing the boundary between us to inspire disbelief, this *'attention'* gives the other their own dimensional relations (§ 180). It sees them in their *'organizational aspects'*, sees them intertwined with their position in time and space. And, if the "technique" (§ 222) by which one *'reads'* aspects as "belong[ing] together" (§ 220) is developed, as Weil suggests, "in relation to... beauty as well as to the good," then the aesthetics of one's *'reading'* have a distinctly ethical value—then, perhaps, one's *'reading'* of others and the world can compel a miraculous compassion, with all the momentum of a melody; a compassion

⁵⁰ Weil writes, "We do not know how to think these things as one, and yet they cannot be thought separately" (*ECR* 27).

that, aware of the limits of its apprehension, nevertheless sees, within those limits, a significant sense of interrelation (*LPW* 27). To have such a technique evidenced in literature is difficult—as Wittgenstein asked and answered, "what does someone who sense the solemnity of a melody perceive? Nothing that could be conveyed by repetition of what was heard" (*PPF* §233). Therefore, we require some heuristic, expressive mediation, which would evidence one's perception of dimensional relations—and, as we turn to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, we receive such a medium: Lily Briscoe's picture.

When Leonard Woolf, upon reading *To the Lighthouse*, called it "psychological poem" (*AWD* 102), I believe he was speaking to its emphasis on how characters 'read' one another and the world. As we turn to the novel, and a comparison of the varying 'techniques' by which the characters make their world sensible, I ask that we keep the conditions of both experiencing something—be it the world, life, or others—as a miracle and the sensation of the depth of others in mind.

Chapter Three

Life Made Sensible:

Mediate Images in Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse'

Object of art: make space and time sensible to us. Contrive for us a human space and time, made by man, which nevertheless are time *itself*, space *itself*. (N 4)

Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, is an interplay between persons, between varied '*readings*' of others and of the world. Through the image of the Lighthouse, and the ocean that surrounds it, the attitudes of divergent characters are given a shared medium in which to display their orientations. Of the four characters this chapter will profile—Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, and Mrs. Ramsay—only Lily Briscoe is not involved with, or invested in, the trip to the Lighthouse; rather, it is through her painting that she mediates a certain sense of dimensional relations, both providing the reader with a heuristic understanding of the novel's interpersonal intricacy, and the narrative ethos that structures that intricacy. This chapter seeks to make those mediate surfaces and exercises apparent in their function. Furthermore, this chapter aims to explore how the narrative attaches a sense of ethics to the divergent '*readings*' of its characters, one that centers Lily Briscoe's use of her medium.

Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called "being in love" flooded them. 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. And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too, as she saw Mr. Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree bending, how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach. (TL 46-7)

Lily Briscoe looks upon the disparate movements of the Ramsay family, lived discretely by each member, and feels those individual moments coalesce into a form of motion both beautiful and brutal, intimate and impersonal. She is at a distance—she is both a biracial woman, half-pitied by a family that feels themselves her patrons, and an artist, surveying what comes before her with an eye for figured relations, for organization and balance. Lily looks upon the Ramsays and feels affection with a sincerity that excludes even herself; the *'love'* felt when she sees them is *'love'* at a figured distance, as she does not say she *'loves'* them herself, does not understand this *'love'* to be an expression of autonomy, of her capacity to *'love'*. It is, instead, "what she call[s] *'being in love'*" that charges the Ramsays with a significance that humbles the height of the "sky," that is shared by birdsong and by the shifting of "cloud... [and] tree" (47). Lily feels this significance, but is not enveloped by the experience of it; it is still a "world seen through" a specific, affective point-of-view, is still "the world seen through the eyes of love" (47). She recognizes that this significance is contingent upon those "eyes," and, thereby, that this world is "unreal," though "penetrating and exciting" (46-7). By that recognition, it is not this significance itself that she commits her attention to, nor its constitutive means; for Lily Briscoe, "what [is] even more exciting" is that "little separate incidents" become confluent and significant, become "curled and whole" (47). Lily wonders at the meaningful becoming of life, is

awed that life should exist as it does, that those atomistic moments "one live[s] one by one," become more than their static sum (47). She has, as Wittgenstein would put it, "the experience of seeing [life] as a miracle" (*LE* 5).

It is for this reason that Lily Briscoe is at the center of *To the Lighthouse*; not only is she an expression of Woolf's sensibility, but she comes to be, by virtue of her artistic medium, an expression of the novel's narrative sensibility. Important in this centering is that, while Lily can experience life as miraculous, this experience does not obscure or reduce life's necessities and sufferings—while just "how life... bec[omes] curled and whole" is miraculous, no less miraculous is that life should, "like a wave... b[ear] one up with it and thr[o]w one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" (*TL* 47). Lily Briscoe, "with her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face," will "never marry," according to Mrs. Ramsay, and "one could not take her painting very seriously" (17). Lily makes an offer of help, "with... emotion that she seldom let appear," and Paul Rayley laughs at her (102). Among the characters to whom we have access, Lily is dismissed and marginalized; she is intimately aware of life's erosive force, and of her dependence upon the intermingled effects of material '*necessity*' and of the exercised autonomy of others. She knows what it is to be "thr[own] down... dash[ed] on the beach" (47). And yet, she acts with grace, and with an awareness of the tension between attrition and compensation, between '*necessity*' and autonomy, that pervades both her life and the lives of others.

This is, perhaps, most laudable in her treatment of Charles Tansley, who has a habit of belittling her (91). Considering him, Lily does not assume that she can apprehend who he essentially is, and thereby indict him on that account; rather, she accepts that "she would never know him... [and] he would never know her" (92). Like her attitude towards '*love*', wherein her experience of "what she call[s] 'being in love'" is mediated by both its articulation and her

affective point-of-view, Lily refuses the terms by which one would authoritatively judge Charles Tansley (46). She recognizes that when he says, "woman can't write, women can't paint," these professed beliefs "clearly... [were] not true to him but [were] for some reason helpful to him" (86). Lily does not evaluate Tansley on her own terms, does not reduce him to her '*reading*' of him, but instead sees his actions as contingent upon a '*reading*' of the world shaped by the pressures of his position within that world, a '*reading*' that seeks compensation. This ability to recognize the dimension in which others exist requires '*faith*' in a depth not available to direct apprehension, and requires an unwillingness to see Tansley as a mere silhouette; Lily finds it "almost impossible to dislike any one if one looked at them" (85), and thus her attention is open, "emptie[d] of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is" (*WG* 115). Thus she trusts that the '*readings*' of others have for them a persuasive sense of reality, of depth, even if such is unavailable to her.

Even when Lily Briscoe desires to get beyond the opaque surface that others present, it is not the desire to penetrate the apparent and apprehend the essential that motivates her. While she imagines that, "in the chambers of the mind and heart of" Mrs. Ramsay, there were "tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything," she is nevertheless certain that "they would never be offered openly" (51). Rather than trying to "press... through into those secret chambers," Lily's desire is the desire to enter into an indivisible relation with Mrs. Ramsay, as she seeks a

...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? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but

intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (*TL* 51)

It is "not knowledge but unity" that she seeks; and this '*unity*' is neither apprehension nor relation, but a becoming that would obliterate even the possibility of speaking of relations '*between*' one another—like "waters poured into one jar," this "mingling" renders any use of '*between*' meaningless, and leaves only "intimacy *itself*, which is knowledge," but knowledge inarticulate and impossible (51 *emph. added*). As Lily both admits and despairs, despite this experience, "nothing happen[s]... Nothing! Nothing!" (51). And yet, after exercising this futile desire, she understands something she cannot strictly apprehend; she "kn[ows] knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart," despite her acknowledged ignorance of just "how... one know[s] one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were" (51). Lily's Briscoe's unrealizable desire—when recognized as unrealizable—becomes a '*faith*' in the internal dimension of Mrs. Ramsay, a dimension she figures as a "dome-shaped hive" (51). And though the lucidity of this moment passes, its depth and dynamism lingers in Lily's perception; as she relays, "for days there hung about [Mrs. Ramsay]... the sound of [bees] murmuring and... she wore, to Lily's eyes, an august shape... the shape of a dome" (51). While just how Lily figures depth differs among the characters, she never allows a conscious person to be a simple silhouette. Just as an artist would not attempt to isolate the "arrow" by which the "animal... is transfixed" from that interpenetration of "animal... [and] arrow" (*PPF* § 180), Lily does not try to insulate the persons in her life from that which runs them through—that is, Lily abstracts those persons from neither their position in the world, nor the demands that world makes upon them. This unwillingness, I argue, is contiguous with the dimensional relations she practices in painting.

The narrative describes Lily's capacity to perceive those dimensional relations—a capacity recognizable only by "a certain kind of 'knowing one's way about'" (§ 180)—in the medium of her painting. Like the boat that becomes "an instrument by which to read the tempest" (*LPW* 26), and like this "language itself [that] is the vehicle of thought" (*PI* § 113), the practice of Lily's painting mediates something vast, indeterminate, and resistant to generalizing description—this is the interrelation of conscious persons, of the dimensions in which they '*read*' the world, '*read*' one another, and are themselves '*read*'. To perceive such intractable relations, as they feed back upon themselves and as they affect one's perception, requires distance; and the mediation of painting allows Lily to develop a heuristic sense of the significance and dimension of such interpersonal relations. Notably, Lily describes her painting as "the residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day's living mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days" (*TL* 52). This vision of hers is not an intentional product of her life, but the "residue... the deposit of each day's living" (52); this "living" is active and affective, and thus "each day" has left Lily with an affected sense of relation, effects that, accrued over "thirty-three years," have become the technique by which she paints (52). It is not, however, a rigidly behaviorist result of cause and effect—"the residue of her thirty-three years" is intermingled with a mystery unspoken or unspeakable (52). This is evidenced when William Bankes, Lily's sincere and "impersonal" interlocutor (24), asks, what "of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows... did [Lily] wish to make...?" (53). He gestures to "the scene before them" (53), and in response

...she looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of

that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among the hedges and houses and mothers and children—her picture. (53)

It is not a question of accurate representation, as Lily "ma[kes] no attempt at likeness" (52). Nor is it merely an expression of her experience, as she "subdue[s] all her impressions as a woman," and "t[akes] up... [an] absent-minded manner" (53). Instead, Lily Briscoe herself, "once more under the power of that vision," becomes a medium for "the power" of a clarity and unity of vision (53). She describes that clarity of vision as "her picture," and that she must suspend her attention and "subdue all her impressions" makes the use of that possessive pronoun curious; to further consider what constitutes that clarity of vision, we should turn to the techniques Lily applies in painting.

Mr. Bankes looks upon Lily's canvas, and asks, "what did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape... just there?" (52). She, aware that "no one could tell it for a human shape," explains to him that it is Mrs. Ramsay "reading to James" (52). Since she makes "no attempt at likeness," his question then becomes, "for what reason had she introduced them...?" (52). The explanation Lily gives demonstrates how it is not her, but the sense of a necessary balance between illumination, color, and depth, which together become a "unity of the whole," that guides her brushstrokes (53); she affirms and quickly dismisses the need of an intention, a "reason" that his question presupposes, saying, "Why indeed?"—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness" (52). Those oppositions—"there... here," "that... this," and "bright... dark" (52)—are the fundamental dividing lines across which the use of language falls, and that Lily sublimates something as vivid and individual as "mother and child" into the balancing of those oppositions is illustrative of how the seeming abstraction of those dimensional relations (52), when considered as an ethics, evidences a distrust. Lily Briscoe, who is aware of the "sealed" inaccessibility of others (51), who has

accepted that "she would never know [Charles Tansley]" (92), refuses her immediate experience of others; this refusal is, I argue, rooted in her distrust of just how intricately linked one's imagination—trained interpretations, value judgments, etc.—and one's perception are. And, Lily's seeming reduction of Mrs. Ramsay and James is perhaps, as Weil would put it, her "accept[ance] that they should be other than the creatures of our imagination," is her "accept[ing] simply that they should *be*" (N 200). It is to affirm that they are more than we are capable of recognizing them *as*.

This affirmation is, for Lily, a mode of reverence irreducible to idolatry; she explains the necessity of balance and "Mr. Bankes was interested" (*TL* 52):

Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence. But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. (52-3)

As she says, "the picture was not of them... not in [Mr. Bankes'] sense," though it nevertheless could be understood to "reverence [Mrs. Ramsay and James]" (52). Of course, Mr. Bankes' sense is the sense in which one's perception of this "mother and child" is assumed to conceive of them as "objects of universal veneration" and "famous... beauty" (52); thereby, to exclude these attributes would be, for him, to "reduce" them (52). For Lily, while the picture is not strictly "of them," it still, "she... suppose[s]... must be a tribute" to them (52)—and there is an important relation between Lily's *'tribute'* to those in her vision and her capacity to *'attribute'* qualities to those persons. Both words stem from the same Latin root, *'tribuere'*, which is to *assign or give*. And the tension between these two meanings demonstrates the tension implicit in

representation—a *'tribute'* is an expression or acknowledgement of one's indebtedness, is a gift given; to *'attribute'* is to ascribe cause, and an *'attribute'* is a quality one apprehends within and inscribes upon an object. Lily, by eliding what *'attributes'* would identify and individuate Mrs. Ramsay and James, paints a *'tribute'*, an acknowledgement that refuses to isolate them from the picture's unity. As she later remarks, "beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely... it stilled life—froze it... [and] one forgot the little agitations" (177). Lily Briscoe paints to find an equilibrium in these "agitations," which would "ma[k]e the face unrecognizable for a moment and yet add[s] a quality one [sees] for ever after" (177). She does not reduce her image to the recognition of its constitutive elements, but seeks that mysterious, miraculous "quality" that would become an enduring sense of depth (177).

Lily Briscoe, through the narrative device of her painting, expresses both an aesthetic and ethical attitude that aligns with the novel's authorial ethos. Virginia Woolf, in an August 1926 diary entry,⁵¹ speaks of how, upon seeing "two resolute, sunburnt, dusty girls," her "instinct at once throws up a screen, which condemns them... think[s] them in every way angular, awkward and self-assertive" (*D* 104); against this instinct, she urges herself to "get at the thing itself, which has nothing whatever in common with a screen" (104). And yet, without these screens, Woolf feels we would "dissolve utterly" (104). We can thus surmise that, for Woolf, we as individual persons with individuated experiences exist precisely because these surfaces intervene between ourselves and others; therefore, if we wish to give the existence of others a dimension equal to our own, it is a question of how to experience that separateness, of how to *'read'* those "screens" (104). And, I argue, Woolf's response to this question is Lily Briscoe and her contingent vision, her sense of relational unities; she and the omniscient narrator share much in

⁵¹ This was, notably, while she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, which was published in 1927.

way of sensibility. While we will return to Lily and her canvas at this chapter's end, we must turn to survey how three other characters— Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, and Mrs. Ramsay—'*read*' themselves and those around them, and are themselves '*read*'.

If painting mediates and gives sensible dimension to other, more indeterminate experiences, then similarly, the fixation with sailing '*to the Lighthouse*' provides the reader with a medium through which the attitudes of characters—specifically as concerns the perceived naivety of others and personal conceits of rationality—become available. The novel opens with the "extraordinary joy" of James Ramsay, inspired by his mother's conditional affirmation—"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow" (3)—of his unstated desire; importantly, this desire to sail '*to the Lighthouse*' draws the narrative focus out into the ocean, a fluid medium the novel vests with both beauty and brutality:

...the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts... at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind was raised from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow...
(15-6)

In *To the Lighthouse*, the "remorseless[ness]" of the ocean does not obscure its beauty, but the two emerge together, inextricable. The novel's attitude, which marries beauty to a sense of '*necessity*' and its ensuing suffering, is aligned with Weil's thought, as

the sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not

this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty. (*WG* 129)

It is the ocean that reminds us that the order of the universe is impersonal; autonomous though a person might be, they march nonetheless to the "remorseless... measure of life" (*TL* 16), are subject to "external pressure[s]" (*WG* 129), and, on the scale of that order, are "as ephemeral as a rainbow" (*TL* 16). Woolf's characters, particularly, are sunlit and refractory in one moment, and clouded, dark, and dissipating in the next; the novel neither evades nor dramatizes mortality, as the deaths of Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay are relegated to short, bracketed sentences, which interject throughout the novel's refrain, *Time Passes*. Against this oceanic backdrop, and through the medium of a child's desire, the characters evidence their '*readings*' of others and of the world.

Mr. Ramsay is, ostensibly, an overwhelmingly rational man, a philosopher with a solemn and clear-eyed view of the world and its sufferings; he repeatedly scorns his wife's attempts to console their children, and figures himself as possessing a rigorous and righteous opposition to those novelties, which would impart fleeting satisfaction and illusory happiness. And yet, his enactment of that very opposition belies that conception of himself. Through narration and comparison with other characters, his insincerity and desperation become apparent—instead of cooperating with the world, or communing with his family, Mr. Ramsay aspires to a mode of absolute self-sufficiency, as he attempts to convince himself "that his being carries the principle of preservation within itself" (*N* 222). After callously foreclosing the possibility of sailing to the lighthouse—asserting, "But... it won't be fine" (*TL* 4)—the narration allows us a glimpse into his consciousness:

...standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically... with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment. What he said was true. It was

always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure. (4)

His "conceit," though far more egregious, bears a resemblance to that which Weil ascribes St. Peter's denial of Christ; she writes, "To say to Christ: 'I will never deny Thee' was to deny him already, for it was supposing the source of faithfulness to be in himself and not in grace" (*N* 148). While Mr. Ramsay certainly would claim truth is metaphysical and apprehended only via correspondence, he nonetheless demonstrates here, in considering himself "incapable of untruth," that his understanding of truth is intertwined with, and sourced from, the certainty of his autonomy (*TL* 4). The perversity of Mr. Ramsay's conceit is that he finds consolation in a self-professed singularity of perception, and therefore in the act of denigrating just how others console themselves—chiding that they ought to face '*necessity*,' all while he '*reads*' in that order of the world his own capacities. The parenthetical, "(here Mr. Ramsay would...)," by drawing back to an exterior view and using that habitual '*would*', trivializes the language around it, the language of a grand and treacherous passage and of Mr. Ramsay's consciousness, reminding us that these thoughts are located in a specific body, are limited to a single man. And that he focuses his opprobrium upon "his own children... sprung from his loins," further evidences the degree to which his identity is the impetus for his criticism; it is not about an acceptance of, and obedience to, '*necessity*', but about the possession of traits such as "courage... and the power to endure" (4). Mr. Ramsay compensates himself for the world's insufficiencies through conceit, through the habitual attribution of laudable qualities to himself.

Mr. Ramsay "narrow[s] his... eyes upon the horizon," but sees neither lighthouse nor ocean, just "the passage to that fabled land" (4). He thinks of his children, and imagines that "Andrew would be a better man than he had been... [and] Prue would be a beauty" (69); to Mr. Ramsay they are silhouettes, abstracted from the vastness of childhood to become a valuable bulwark against his inevitable obscurity, as he argues to himself that "that was a good bit of work on the whole—his eight children" (69). For Mr. Ramsay, there is no open *'attention'*, no "suspending [one's] thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to..." (*WG* 111) "receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is" (115). For him, there is no dimension of the world in excess of his speculative intelligence. He is unable to perceive the ordinary as beautiful, as miraculous, as anything that could be beyond his capacity for "approv[al]" (*TL* 42). His perception is bound to the exercise of that capacity:

...he looked; he nodded; he approved; he went on. He slipped, seeing before him that hedge which had over and over again rounded some pause, signified some conclusion, seeing his wife and child, seeing again the urns with trailing red geraniums which had so often decorated processes of thought, and bore, written up among their leaves, as if they were scraps of paper on which one scribbles notes in the rush of reading—he slipped, seeing all this, smoothly into speculation... (42)

The world, "hedge[s]... wife and child... urns... geraniums" and all, is the material upon which he inscribes his *'reading'* (42). The language lacquered over the world, the particular dialect of metaphysics Mr. Ramsay has developed, causes him to "slip," continually and "smoothly into speculation" (42); in the above passage, the "slipp[ing]" brackets the objects of his perception, sublimating that content into a phrasal organization, which elides the objects themselves, as the saying of a phrase forgets its constitutive letters (42). And, having practiced this capacity for *'reading'*, Mr. Ramsay cannot help but "slip... into speculation" (42), since, as Weil says, "we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand that is placed in front of us and not read

it" (*LPW* 23). However, it is the specificity of this '*reading*' that makes Mr. Ramsay a uniquely anxious solipsist; he frets over the value of his perspective, as he has gone so very far in fabricating his own idiom that he is often and intensely aware of his solitude, feeling as if he had "come out... on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone" (*TL* 44). This solitude is, for Mr. Ramsay, alternately evidence "of his splendid mind" (33) and that which makes him self-pitying, "demanding [of] sympathy" (37). Before turning to this hunger for affirmation, we should look closer at the constitution of Mr. Ramsay's '*reading*'.

The meanings he '*reads*' in the world are self-referential; he repeats isolated lines of poetry and certain phrases continually—"Some one had blundered" (18, 30, 33)—without meaningful context. Like the "reduc[ti]on of lovely evenings... to a white deal four-legged table" (23), Mr. Ramsay is continually trying to isolate '*essence*', to penetrate to a metaphysical truth. He, describing "his splendid mind," uses a telling simile (35):

For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q... But after Q? What comes next? (35)

He raises, first, the possible descriptive value of the piano, of the individuated notes of a musical instrument, before abandoning that comparison in favor of the more easily atomistic letters of the alphabet. Remarkably, the metaphor he chooses to illustrate the difficulty of his task, and the breadth of his competency, is the elementary exercise one uses to introduce children to written language; not only is reciting the alphabet quite precisely elementary, but, within this metaphor, Mr. Ramsay can only reach Q, can only reach the seventeenth letter of the alphabet. An exercise of considerable ease is used to represent what appears as, for Mr. Ramsay, an extremely

strenuous task. This metaphor intimates both a teleological attitude towards thought and knowledge, predicated upon the possibility of arriving at Z, "which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes" (34), and a sense of utter absurdity. While the choice of metaphor reinforces the possibility of arriving at some ultimate epistemological end, some final revelation, it also illustrates just how convoluted his attitude towards conscious life is. He may feel certain that "he ha[s], or might have had, the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order" (34), but the alphabet, like consciousness, has an organic and highly variable ordinary use, irreducible to their constitutive synapses or letters.

However, his dismissal of the metaphoric potential of musical notes is also his dismissal of this complexity; and furthermore, he is dimly aware of the obstacle this dismissal presents, though he, ironically, attributes his inability to "reach R" to his exclusion from an essential category (34):

The geranium in the urn became startlingly visible and, displayed among its leaves, he could see, without wishing it, that old, obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash—the way of genius. He had not genius... (34)

The "startling... visib[ility]" of the flowers prompts an undesired '*reading*'; their sudden reality, broaching his imaginings of the "qualities that in a desolate expedition across the icy solitudes of the Polar region would have made him the leader," elicits the recognition of an alternative to his approach and attitude—a recognition of something that, for Mr. Ramsay, appears "miraculous" (34). This is the possibility that the letters could be "lump[ed]... together in one flash" (34). Of course, that they be "lump[ed]" and compiled conforms to his understanding that knowledge is to be isolated, apprehended. What eludes him, is what he dismisses in dismissing the metaphor of

the piano; he is unable to understand that letters—and their imagined, epistemological counterparts—mean very little, if not nothing, in isolation. As with musical notes, what is miraculous about letters is the life they gain in use, is that they can become meaningful phrases, just as notes become melody; rather than being crudely "lump[ed]... together," there is a self-organizing, organic dimension to the relations between letters and musical notes, and to try to "lump [those]... together" (34) is akin to collapsing the dimensions and interrelations of a melody into a discordant, simultaneous sum—just like "repeat[ing] every letter... in order," to "lump... together" is to act as if an inventory were all that was needed (34). Instead, we recite the alphabet or consider philosophical principles because, as Weil states, "one does not play Bach without having practised scales... but nor does one practise scales for the sake of the scales" (*N* 267). Unwilling to concede that he does not, and need not, possess "superhuman strength," Mr. Ramsay is committed to a '*reading*' of the world that ignores its continuous and organic constitution, in order to provision him with the possibility of apprehending '*Z*', of grasping some ultimate, essential knowledge (*TL* 34). And while this disregard allows him to see everywhere cavalry charges "through the valley of death" (30) and perilous "expeditions" (35), it devalues his ordinary reality, making it appear flat and unreal. In attempting to attain some mode of metaphysical self-sufficiency, Mr. Ramsay has crippled his capacity to relate, emotionally and experientially, to the world and to others. This incapacity is, of course, untenable, and thereby he becomes "demanding [of] sympathy," and dependent upon his wife for assurance (37).

Arising from the futility of an imagined, "doomed expedition," and seeking out his wife to console him, Mr. Ramsay justifies his need by asking himself, "who will blame [me] if [I] do homage to the beauty of the world?" (36). However, the form that this "homage" takes is not that of a '*tribute*', is not a straightforward appeal to, and acknowledgement of Mrs. Ramsay's

compassion (36), but is instead an attribution of function; he states, "[I am] a failure," both expecting and needing her to convince him otherwise (37). He sees her beauty as "a rain of energy... [a] delicious fecundity, [a] fountain and spray of life," and cedes to that beauty any possibility of addressing his incapacities himself, as against her "fecundity" he figures himself as a "fatal sterility" (37). Mr. Ramsay solicits his wife's attention as a means of replenishing his sense of depth, of reality:

It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life—the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life. (37)

In seeking a sense of depth and dimension—"all the rooms of the house made full... behind... above... and beyond (37)—he turns to his wife, and she tells him, "well, look then, feel then," and "by her laugh, her poise, her confidence... assure[s] him, beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was real... the house was full" (38). He comes to her and demands that she display her depth, that she prove her reality to him; and, inexplicably, by becoming "a column... [a] fountain and spray of life," she does so, and exhausts her energies, like "the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat" (38). "Filled... restored, [and] renewed," he leaves—but for Mrs. Ramsay, "there [is] scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by" (38). To have given of her depth, to have had it plumbed and verified, reduces both that depth and her relation to it, as what she would "know herself by" is reduced to "scarcely a shell" (38). This, more than the damage done to himself, is the evidence that Mr. Ramsay's *'reading'* does not align with the novel's ethics. He does not perceive relations, does not act with consideration and compassion for the dimension in which others live—instead, either turns from them with disbelief, or demands an impossible demonstration.

Charles Tansley, too, "clapping his hands together as he stood at the window with [Mr. Ramsay]," feels compelled to proclaim, "there'll be no landing at the Lighthouse tomorrow" (7). Like Mr. Ramsay, Tansley is a scholar, and covets knowledge both teleological and absolute; and like Mr. Ramsay, this covetousness isolates Tansley, and this isolation stokes anxiety. However, he has not the comforts of age, family, or professional success—like Lily Briscoe, he is at the margins, a doctoral student without the money for anything other than "his old flannel trousers" (86). But unlike Lily, the function of Charles Tansley's distance is a "self-consciousness"—as "he could not say it right... he could not feel it right" (11)—and this function is always returning him to himself; he has no medium except himself through which to figure his relation to the world or to others. And as such, he is always seeking to explain himself, to contextualize that by which he *'reads'* the world. He tells Mrs. Ramsay of "how [his] family did not go to circuses... [how] he himself had paid his own way since he was thirteen," as if such explanations could lay bare exactly *why* he is as he is (12); "he c[omes] out instantly with all that about his father and mother and brothers and sisters," as if such a display would open that dimension of his experience to view, and would not display also the evidence of how compensates himself, of how he orchestrates his past in support of a sense of self-satisfaction, of self-sufficiency (12). Perhaps Charles Tansley knows what it is to be "thr[own] down... dash[ed] on the beach" (47), but his attitude towards James—mimicking Mr. Ramsay, he, too, scorns a child's desire—as well as the explicit misogyny he turns upon Lily, both demonstrate just how the conceit of his autonomy and authority makes him incapable of earnest interpersonal relations; he is entirely unable to "give up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all

points in the world are equally centers" (*WG* 159-60). Instead, he translates his distance from others into disdain.

That disdain devalues those around him, collapsing their motivations, personality, and depth into the significance of their distance from him—a distance that reinforces the privilege he feels in being himself. He *'reads'* himself as an exception, and others as the norm; around the dinner table, "he was not going to talk the sort of rot these people wanted him to talk" (*TL* 85).

Mrs. Ramsay asks, "are you a good sailor, Mr. Tansley?" and he states

...he had never been sick in his life. But in that one sentence lay compact, like gunpowder, that his grandfather was a fisherman; his father a chemist; that he was proud of it; that he was Charles Tansley—a fact that nobody there seemed to realize; but one of these days every single person would know it. He scowled ahead of him. He could almost pity these mild cultivated people, who would be blown sky high, like bales of wool and barrels of apples, one of these days by the gunpowder that was in him. (91-2)

The narration unpacks that succinct response; Tansley feels his ancestry and adolescence compound into pride and a sense of his own potency—and this potency is the fact "that he was Charles Tansley," a fact he imagines to have inevitable significance, as "one of these days every single person would know it" (91). The arrogance and solipsism put on display needs little analysis; Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, and even the children know that "what his criticism of poor Sir Walter, or perhaps Jane Austen, amount[s] to" is simply "'I—I—I,'" is simply him "thinking of himself and the impression he was making" (106). He is a counterpoint to the novel's relational narrative, which, by opening up multiple points-of-view, challenges the conflation of one's use of first-person pronoun with a unique authority; Woolf, by demonstrating that Charles Tansley sees the value of *'being'* as "less and less concentrated the f[u]rther it is removed from" him (*WG* 159), and by figuring this distance within his use of the first-, second-, and third-person pronouns, makes his devaluing of others seem absurd—as he, too, is given in the third-person.

To declare "that he [is] Charles Tansley" has no more significance, describes no more depth, than the same declaration in the mind or mouth of anyone else (*TL* 91). And yet, that Charles Tansley uses his name and the first-person pronoun as a constant recourse in conversation, demonstrates that he is incapable of engaging with significance that does not, in some way, signify something of himself; it is this utter reliance upon his self-conception that, in his '*reading*', flattens the intricate forms of ordinary relationships, and that leaves him unable to have '*faith*' in the experiential depth of others.

Charles Tansley and Mr. Ramsay evidence similar incapacities, but what distinguishes them is that which allows Mr. Ramsay to assume a "guise that... inspire[s]... reverence, and pity, and gratitude too," an appearance likened to "a stake driven into the bed of a channel [that] inspires... a feeling of gratitude for the duty it is taking upon itself of marking the channel out there in the floods alone" (44). The difference between them is, simply, that Mr. Ramsay has a witness, has his wife's attention—she tells him to put "an implicit faith in her" (37). And so, at whatever distance from the world and others he may feel himself to be, he does not look across that distance with the same disdain as Tansley; he trusts her, trusts that, if he turns to look, she will be looking back.

Mrs. Ramsay is, perhaps, the most complicated of the novel's characters, as she is tightly and continually interwoven with the lives of her family, friends, and acquaintances. In the novel's first part, *The Window*, Mrs. Ramsay predominates; fluid and attentive, we receive many characters through her consciousness, and she acts towards others with an almost gratuitous kindness and consideration. She ably manages the needs of eight children, supports a demanding, abstracted husband, and facilitates social communion between those in the family's orbit—and

nevertheless finds time for charitable acts (14). Mrs. Ramsay gives of herself, but in this apparent gratuity, she remains opaque to her recipients. As our ambiguous, omniscient narrator puts it:

What was there behind it—her beauty and her splendor? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married—some other, earlier lover, of whom rumours reached one? Or was there nothing? nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind and could do nothing to disturb? For easily though she might have said at some moment of intimacy when stories of great passion, of love foiled, of ambition thwarted came her way how she too had known or felt or been through it herself, she never spoke. She was silent always. She knew then—she knew without having learnt. Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified. Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained—falsely perhaps. (28-9)

Those around Mrs. Ramsay see her beauty, and are stopped at that beauty; they mistake her silence for an obedience to this *'beauty'*, for an essential gracefulness that—as "she could do nothing to disturb" her ostensive splendor—gives her inexorably to "truth," and this *'truth'* doubles as the function in which she "delight[s], ease[s], [and] sustain[s]" (28-9). Those who look upon Mrs. Ramsay omit her conscious labor, ignoring the dimension and depth of her everyday life, as well as the attrition that her deference entails.⁵² The narrator acts in proxy for those observers, miming what consideration would disregard the autonomy that enables, not an obedience to *'beauty'*, but a deference to expectation; "she knew *then*—knew without having learnt," and the inference in that *'then'* is the elision of fifty years of "learn[ing]," of training (29 *emph. added*). Therefore, in the passages given through Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness, there is an antagonism between her and this habitual deference, which troubles the unremitting, apparent

⁵² If beauty is the only finality here below, then to be beautiful, to be able to use that end as means, is surely a warping thing—

quality of her beauty. And the measured doubt of this passage's addendum—the "falsely perhaps"—rings of Mrs. Ramsay, and thereby inflects that description of "beauty and... splendor" with her awareness of how she is *'read'* (28-9).

Rather than blithe innocence, Mrs. Ramsay "could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty" (41). She carries with her the knowledge that "men, and women too, letting go of the multiplicity of things, had allowed themselves with her the relief of simplicity" (41). She had no say in her possession of this capacity, and assumably, for her, to exercise this capacity is to cleave to a half-century of expectation, reaction, and habitual usage; however, Mrs. Ramsay's imagination acts upon the present, and when a gracious offer is spurned by Mr. Carmichael, she feels "her own beauty becoming, as it did so seldom, present to her" (41). Considering it, feeling both her power to wield this beauty and its limits, Mrs. Ramsay's self-consciousness appears to her as conceit, and she suspects herself of being duplicitous, wondering if "this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity" (41). In the wake of this sudden self-consciousness, she thinks to herself that "human relations," that at which she excels, are "flawed... despicable... self-seeking, at their best" (42). And yet, she continues "to give, to help" (41), though this confused opposition between the conscious exercise of, and habitual deference to, her beauty delimits what she is able to "call life" (60):

Only she thought life—and a little strip of time presented itself to her eyes—her fifty years. There it was before her—life. Life, she thought—but she did not finish her thought. She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it, as it was of her; and sometimes they parleyed (when she sat alone); there were, she remembered, great reconciliation scenes; but for the most part, oddly enough, she must admit that she felt this thing that

she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance.
(59-60)

What "clear sense" Mrs. Ramsay can get of life, as "something real," is unable to include a significant dimension of "her fifty years," which was and is intertwined with the needs of her "children [and] husband"—that is, it excludes her deference to the necessities of her life (59). Notably, she refuses to articulate what *'life'* is, breaking off her thought repeatedly. Still, in this moment, she formulates an antagonism between herself and *'life'*, with her "on one side... [and] life... on another" (59). In this opposition, she sides against the life she lives in deference; and yet, it is that dimension of her experience which "she call[s] life" (59). Thereby, she is estranged from *'life'* and must conduct "a sort of transaction" across the boundary which separates her from that *'life'* (59). And, assumably, it is this sense of transactional mediation that lends an unreal quality to the life she shares with her family, as those relations are flattened to the sterility of a "transaction" (59). For Mrs. Ramsay, life, therefore, is "flawed... [and] self-seeking" (42); at a distance from her, it is "terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce" (59). She is separated from what "she call[s] life" by a sense of *'unreality'* she attributes to having had her own life "shared," having had it diluted by her deference (59). And yet, it is not resentment she feels, nor is it regret—at least, it is not a regret that centers any ideation of what she could, or should have been, were it not for her beauty or her marriage. What compels her to figure herself at a distance from life is diffuse and indeterminate; and, as with Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley, her treatment of James' desire to sail *'to the Lighthouse'* manifests something of her attitude towards life, towards being an autonomous person bound to a world both beautiful and unrelenting.

Mrs. Ramsay's reply to her son, "yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," opens the novel, and this conditional affirmation is illustrative of how she wishes to fulfill and support his desire—saying both, "yes," and "of course" (3)—but is unable to pretend that the fulfilment of

his desire hinges upon her or anyone else; instead, it is dependent on whether "it's fine tomorrow," on fluctuations of wind and weather (3). Unlike her husband, who authoritatively asserts that "there [i]sn't the slightest possible chance that they could go to the Lighthouse tomorrow," Mrs. Ramsay allows for the possibility that the "wind [might] change" (31). She feels that her children are "happier now than they would ever be again" (59), and "know[s] what was before them... love and ambition and being wretched [and] alone in dreary places" (60). Perhaps recalling what her own deference obscured, Mrs. Ramsay is not eager to subject her children to the tension between the world's demands and their desires, nor is she willing to position personal conceits of courage and compensation as a bulwark against the remorseless *'necessity'* of life. And, perhaps most importantly, Mrs. Ramsay is aware of the depth of a child's perspective, of the joy in their *'reading'* of the world, as they have only just begun to "arrange a whole hierarchy of values around" them (*WG* 158); what the Lighthouse signifies for James is not articulated, and is, for both the reader and Mrs. Ramsay, accessible only as a "wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed" (*TL* 3). Full of unknowing "wonder" and an anticipation insensible to time, James looks out into the ocean (3). Mrs. Ramsay can see that "this going to the Lighthouse was a passion of his" (15), and she opposes this to the attitudes of her other, older children:

Strife, divisions, differences of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh, that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense. She went from the dining-room, holding James by the hand, since he would not go with the others. (8)

To be committed as James is committed to the Lighthouse, is to countenance no "division," no doubt—this child's desire is a dimension of experience that approaches the unity Lily Briscoe imagines, desires, and admits impossible—one's "becoming, like waters poured into one jar,

inextricably the same, one with the object one adored" (51). James' certainty has the quality of *'faith'*. Or, at the very least, Mrs. Ramsay *'reads'* such a unity of desire and object in her son's "passion" (15); and her experience of the lighthouse's illumination evidences both her yearning for, and her resistance to, the "becoming" of a child's desire (51).

Sitting alone, she feels that figuration of herself, held together by her daily deference and the eyes always upon her, dissolve; she muses, "not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience... but as a wedge of darkness" (63). For Mrs. Ramsay, it is one's "personality" that imparts momentum, "the fret, the hurry, the stir," to ordinary life (63). In this placid moment, as she sheds that personality, "she look[s] out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke," and feels "r[i]se to her lips... some exclamation of triumph over life" (63). However, what "r[i]ses to her lips" is the declaration, "We are in the hands of the Lord" (63); she immediately rebukes herself for this invocation of God, "return[ing] to her knitting" (63) and asking

How could any Lord have made the world? With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that. (64)

The deity touted by some—active, omnipotent, and benevolent—cannot be reconciled with a world that includes, and commonly condones, suffering; "she kn[o]ws that" (64). She "seize[s]... fact[s]" to contradict such a farcical, tropological God (64). And yet, as she turns from her argument, from that figured opposition of *'either/or'*, she hears "only the sound of the sea," and "stop[s] knitting" (64). Listening to the ocean, her attention open,

...she saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one's relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the

night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor) but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and wave of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (64-5)

Her "relations changed," this light, "pitiless...remorseless," personal and impersonal, resolves the factual contradiction that disallowed an experience of life, her life, as miraculous—"for all that she thought" of the world, for all her '*reading*' of the world as unconscionable, she nevertheless "had known happiness" (65). By the "stroking" of the light, that "sealed vessel" (65), which would "throw up a screen, which [would] condemn" the world, and which had estranged her from '*life*', is perceived within its limits and confined to those limits (104 *D v.3*); and Mrs. Ramsay, in recognizing quite how miraculous it is that "she had known happiness," feels "ecstasy burst in her eyes," an ecstasy rooted in perceiving the world as "enough" (65). In this moment, she feels a sufficiency in excess of any possible expectation, sees this light "shed a luster upon [her life] which colors [it] with finality" (*WG* 167). While Mrs. Ramsay is herself a beacon, as, in relation to her beauty, her husband, children, and friends orient themselves, it is through the illumination of the Lighthouse that she sees her life in unity. And in this light, the contradiction in her deference is reconciled, and made miraculous—as, for Christ the cross was both "an offering freely consented to and a punishment undergone entirely against one's will" (*N* 415). She sees, suddenly and passingly, her life in unity.

Mrs. Ramsay "die[s] rather suddenly" (*TL* 128). She, who held the whole together, departs, and the Ramsay's summer house is "left like a shell on a sandhill" (137). When it is reclaimed, when it is again, through the efforts of Mrs. McNab, furnished and filled, Lily Briscoe is the first to reenter the narrative; she sits at the table and asks herself:

What does it mean then, what can it all mean? ...what does it mean?—a catchword that was, caught up from some book, fitting her thoughts loosely, for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsays, contract her feelings, could only make this phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk. For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all. (145)

In the novel's third part, *The Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam sail to the titular destination; Lily paints, returning to her picture. Each reckons with that question—what do they feel, what does it mean that his wife, their mother, that Mrs. Ramsay is dead? And, since they feel "nothing that [they] could express" (145), in order to give such indeterminate feeling relation and significance—as the Ramsays are now "a house full of unrelated passions" (148)—they turn to something that would mediate "an absence that is felt," that would make Mrs. Ramsay's memory meaningful (*N* 343). For her family, at the behest of her husband, this is an "expedition... to the Lighthouse" (*TL* 145), and for Lily, this is to take up, again, "a problem about the foreground of [her] picture" (147). Sitting at the table alone, she feels "no relations with... the house, the place, the morning," and thinks of "how unreal it was... as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut" (146). Lily looks "at the drawing room steps," feels them "extraordinarily empty" (178); she feels "the whole wave and whisper of the garden bec[o]me like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness" (179). Mrs. Ramsay's absence pervades Lily's vision; and while, at first, it flattens the scene, leaving lives disparate and unrelated, it becomes itself a center around which a sense of dimensional

relation gathers—and in this interplay of flat unreality and vivid, affective absence, the question of agitations, balance, and unity becomes ever more urgent; Lily returns to her picture.

And, in returning to her picture, Lily mediates Woolf's authorial predicament; she asks

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in one one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. (161)

If there is no "great revelation," no final understanding that would put all to rest, then how does one end a novel without being abrupt, and how can one preserve a sense of unity? (161).

Conclusion

A Line There, In the Centre

It is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact. (PI § 445)

Hoping—what hope is, is not a *what*; to have hope is not to possess anything. Rather, to hope is a repetition of action, expression—is to figure an expectation in language, to give it a form open to fulfilment. Without that medium, we could say nothing of hope, and without that form, our lives would be unremitting. That medium gives us the possibility of completion, of contact and unity—like Lily Briscoe's vision, which allows her to draw "a line there, in the centre," and thus feel her picture "was done... was finished," it is the medium that allows us an "attempt at something," that allows us a heuristic coalescence of hope, effort, and their effect, which makes life other than interminable (208-9). And yet, to be able to both hope, and hold oneself apart from that hope—to feel that you have "had [your] vision," and yet know that all you have done is draw "a line there, in the centre" (209)—is that which enables one "to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy" (202). To have the oppositions that figure one's hopes and disappointments dissolved—to step away from the medium, from one's imagination—is what allows Mrs. Ramsay to cry, "It is enough! It is enough!" (64-5).

In my life, those forms of hope, expectation, satisfaction and disappointment came together only lately—that is, I was late in coming out *as* transgender. And coming out is a form of that hope, that expectation, made conceivable in language. *Coming out* was this; it was a compulsion ceded to, a compulsion to name; it was taking a vector of experience, previously marginalized as mere dissonance, and allowing it to signify something—allowing that experience significance, so as to experience that significance. But the hopes, the expectations it imparts—

imagined trajectories, alignments, achievements—I leave to language. I will not indict others on the grounds of their ignorance or apathy, nor myself on what I haven't the will to attempt. Weil:

Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We should remit them this debt. To accept that they should be other than creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God; to accept simply that they should *be*. I, too, am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness. (*N* 200)

I am both less than, and in excess of, myself; and this medium—literature, language—has allowed me such an understanding, imperfect as it is. This project was concerned with those forms of relation and the mediums that figure them; it was concerned with the limits of a world, and of a self, made sensible; it looked to what—thankfully—falls beyond our understanding. And what of the dimensions of miracle? Of moments few and far between, of "matches struck unexpectedly in the dark[?]" (161). This project has left me with a certain faith, which sets anticipation aside, and has taught me the distance at which to cherish them. Of miracle, I cannot say more. Only gesture to the gratuitous world.

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