

Darkness Beyond the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf, Charles Baudelaire, and Literary Modernism.

By Benjamin D. Carson

“A work of art is abundant, spills out, gets drunk, sits up with you all night and forgets to close the curtains, dries your tears, is your friend, offers you a disguise, a difference, a pose. Cut and cut it through and there is still a diamond at the core. Skim the top and it is rich. The inexhaustible energy of art is transfusion for a worn-out world. When I read Virginia Woolf she is to my spirit, waterfall and wine.”

—Jeanette Winterson¹

“The world is ugly. / And the people are sad.”

—Wallace Stevens²

In Virginia Woolf’s worn-out world—a world that “hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (Arnold 136)—the “inexhaustible energy of art [was],” for her, “transfusion” (Winterson 65). It was in and through art that Woolf found solace—solace from modern life, a life that was too fast for her, and a world in which, as Cam Ramsay suggests, “There is no God” (Woolf 207). It was through art that Woolf was able to stave off despair for as long as she did; for she, like the old man in Hemingway’s well-lighted café, knew that “[life] was all a nothing and a man [sic] was nothing too . . . it was all *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*” (Hemingway 291). She knew “we perished, each alone” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 207).³

So like Baudelaire, in the midst of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” (Marx 83), Woolf became her “own king, priest and God” (Baudelaire, “Exhibition” 122). And finding the world “all in scraps and fragments” (Woolf, *TTL* 90), she “raised a [pen]: swung it high in air” (91) and forged something “eternal and . . . immovable” from the “transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (Baudelaire, “Painter” 403).

Though a number of postmodern critics, including Toril Moi and Pamela Caughie, have claimed Woolf as one of their own, it is my contention that *To the Lighthouse* is quintessentially modern, and that the lens through which *To the Lighthouse* is best illuminated is provided by Baudelaire in his important essay “The Painter of Modern Life.” There Baudelaire argues, “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the

contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable” (403).⁴ Modern life, as Woolf understood, is “not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf, “Modern” 189). And it is from, by and through this “luminous halo” that we abstract “Truth”—reality behind the appearance, the “eternal and the immovable.” But the existence of *a priori* Truth has been called into question by postmodernism; and what distinguishes postmodernists, in all their various guises, from modernists is the latter’s inexorable “pursuit of truth” (Woolf, *TTL* 32).

While Woolf sought the eternal and the immovable in fleeting moments of being, postmodernists simply abandon the search for a fundamental, ahistorical Truth, what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls a “grand narrative” (xxiii). Postmodernists, in effect, cut Baudelaire’s definition of modernity in half, opting only for “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent.” Through art, Woolf, like Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, attempted to recover the “unity of the whole,” to subdue the chaos loosed upon the world by capitalist modernity (Woolf, *TTL* 53). In the interim years between World War I and World War II, hypersensitive artists like Woolf felt the “sea [was] eating the ground we stand on” (*TTL* 44).

By focusing too narrowly on the novel’s textual level or its form, critics who see in Woolf’s work as proto-postmodernist, tend to ignore the importance that the “pursuit of truth” held for her (32). It is Woolf’s “pursuit” that is important here.⁵ In such uncertain times, a Prufrockian time of “alienation,” of “political anxiety,” of “moral bottomlessness,” a time in which the “foundations of religion and ethics, the integrity of governments and selves, the survival of a redemptive culture” were all being called into question (Levenson 5), a center—or Truth—was needed, something in which one could believe, something which would quell such pervasive anxiety. As Derrida argued in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” it is the concept of a centered structure, or a “full presence which is beyond play,” that provides a sense of stability, a solid, untouchable refuge from the hungry sea (279). He writes,

the concept of a centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of

play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset. (279)

Through Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* we get a glimpse of Woolf trying to master anxiety. As Keith May rightfully argues, the central theme of *To the Lighthouse* is the “creation of order out of confusion” (91); and for there to be order there must be a center, something around which all else can be organized.

What makes *To the Lighthouse* a representative text of literary modernism is its unrelenting quest for something solid, something that doesn't, in Marx's words, “melt into air.” In *Sexual/ Textual Politics* Toril Moi argues that “Woolf ... seems to practice what we might now call a ‘deconstructive’ form of writing, one that engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse. In her own textual practice, Woolf exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning” (9). By focusing too narrowly on language, though, and the “moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (Derrida 280), Moi ignores Woolf's need for something stable, something solid—“something to base her vision on” (Woolf, *TTL* 181). Yes, the “vision must be perpetually remade,” and therein lies the “pursuit.” But that on which “her vision” is based must be eternal and immovable. As Cam Ramsay saw, as the waves ate up the “ground we stand on ... The Lighthouse became immovable, and the line of the distant shore became fixed” (44, 183). While Woolf does “[seem] to practice what we might now call a ‘deconstructive’ form of writing,” it is, in my mind, a mistake to ignore the ways in which Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, in *To the Lighthouse*, struggle to give shape to their worlds. If the central theme of the novel is the attempt to make order out of chaos, to reconstruct a whole out of fragments, then to relegate Mrs. Ramsay and Lily to an irreparable world, a world out of which no order can be made, is to exile them to Barth's Funhouse—“*a place of fear and confusion*” (Barth 32).

Like Moi, Herbert and Caughie see Woolf as a postmodern writer. Herbert oxymoronically refers to Woolf as a “postmodern modernist” (Herbert 10), while Caughie argues that Woolf's “works are susceptible to analysis by means of this

[postmodern] category” (Caughie 21). While these arguments are useful, and even marginally persuasive, it seems to me that a more appropriate way of reading *To the Lighthouse* is by way of Baudelaire, whose definition of modernity most effectively illuminates the central tension of the novel, the need for order and the reality of chaos.

“How could any Lord have made this world?” Mrs. Ramsay asks, early in the novel (64). “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. She knitted with firm composure ...” (64). There is no God in Mrs. Ramsay’s life, certainly no benevolent God. She “called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance” (60). So Mrs. Ramsay, not unlike the speaker in “Dover Beach,” takes refuge in a relationship. While her relationship with Mr. Ramsay is loveless, it functions as a buffer to the knowledge that “we perished, each alone” (191).⁶ Mrs. Ramsay’s marriage, her children, especially James and Cam, shelter her from the “intensity of [her] isolation and the waste of the ages and the perishing of the stars” (36). And though she is well aware of the fact that this shelter is permeable, that “no happiness lasted,” she encourages Minta to marry: “... Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her ... or triumphs won by her ... and here she saddened, darkened, and came back to her chair, there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman ... an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (49). It is Mrs. Ramsay’s hope that Minta’s marriage will be happier than her own, though it’s clear that that probably won’t be the case.

One evening, as Mrs. Ramsay sits knitting (an act of creation, however seemingly insignificant), she “felt, one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight. She listened ...there was only the sound of the sea She saw the light again She looked at the *steady light*” (64-65; emphasis mine). In her world, a world with “no reason, order, justice” (64), a world where all is transient and in flux (a flux represented by the “sound of the sea,” the “rough waves”), the light from the lighthouse provides something “steady,” an intimation of immutability. As Mrs. Ramsay watched the light, “she felt, It is enough! It is enough!” (65). The light from the lighthouse is not unlike the light of Hemingway’s clean, well-lighted café. For Mrs. Ramsay, as for the old man who “like[s] to stay late at the café,”

the light is enough; it *must* be enough amidst “a nothing [she] knew too well” (Hemingway 291). Ironically, in a very different context, Woolf, in an attempt to explain the significance of the lighthouse, wrote, “I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together” (qtd. in Caramagno 95). In other words, without a center there is no “intelligible order” (95), even if that center is, ultimately, *nothing*. And, like Woolf, what Mrs. Ramsay wants is order. It was “unity that she desired” (Woolf, *TTL* 51). However unsatisfactory her marriage, it was within the confines of her life with Mr. Ramsay and her children that she attempts to find order and, finally, meaning.

It is through Lily that we come to see and understand Mrs. Ramsay’s impulse to make life whole; and it is *because of* Mrs. Ramsay that Lily attempts to make her life whole: to make life like a work of art; to capture the eternal and the immovable in the transient, the fleeting; to make order out of chaos; and to prevent all that is solid from melting into air. In an epiphanous moment, Lily asks herself, “What is the meaning of life?” Her answer is of paramount importance:

That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on 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. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, ‘Life stand still here’; Mrs. Ramsay *making of the moment something permanent* (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. ‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she repeated. She owed it all to her. (161; emphasis mine)

As Lily’s response suggests, it is through art, or life as art, that the eternal can be found, found in the “passing and flowing,” the “little separate incidents” of modern life:

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. (47; emphasis mine)

Like Mrs. Ramsay, Lily sought balance, and she sought that balance through art, through painting. She modeled herself after Mrs. Ramsay, and when Mrs. Ramsay died Lily was set adrift. “Really, she was angry with Mrs. Ramsay” (149). Without Mrs. Ramsay to distract Mr. Ramsay, she was left “to ward off Mr. Ramsay and his exactingness” by herself (149). And his presence distracted her. He kept her from finishing her painting, and more importantly, from completing her vision. This is deeply troubling to Lily, because it is through art that she seeks and ultimately finds balance. But “for whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture” (193). Mr. Ramsay, the paragon of rationalism, is consumed by the fact that “he reached Q” but will never get to R (33): “A shutter, like a leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R—” (34). (Here one hears an echo of Prufrock: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”) Such extreme rationalism, Jürgen Habermas argues, is indicative of the “project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment” (9).

This over valuation of rationalism, along with “objective science, universal morality and law” (Habermas 9), and “constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (Marx 83), increases the threat that “the life world, whose traditional substance has already been devalued, will become more and more impoverished” (Habermas 9). Mr. Ramsay’s rationalism has effectively alienated him from his family—especially James, who, at one point, thinks, “had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, [he] would have seized it” (4). While Mrs. Ramsay is “a sponge sopped full of human emotions,” Mr. Ramsay is an unfeeling “lizard” (though his own loneliness, admittedly, betrays at every turn the blind optimism of rationalist, enlightenment thinking) (32). The dehumanization that follows from Mr. Ramsay’s kind of thinking, caused in no small measure by the revolutionizing of the instruments of production, is

one of the characteristics of capitalist modernity. The elevation of “reason” above all other human faculties, Mrs. Ramsay would agree, leads to an “astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings[;] to rend the thin veils of civilisation so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency ...” (32).⁷

It is useful to think here of Mr. Ramsay as the “one half of art” in Baudelaire’s formulation of modernity, the “transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (Baudelaire 403). Lily’s picture, then, represents the other half of art—the “eternal and the immovable” (403). These are the “two opposite forces,” “those masses,” Lily—and I’d argue, Woolf—is trying to “balance” (Woolf, *TTL* 193, 148). And while “the art of painting represents all forms of art” in *To the Lighthouse*, it is important to compare briefly the way the narrative works and the way painting functions in the novel (May 91).

Narratives move in time, and though a good period of time passes during which Lily is completing her painting (ten years), the urge and urgency to complete the painting is grounded in a desire to stop time. It is a desire for unity, to make something whole out of the fragments, life’s “little separate incidents” (Woolf, *TTL* 47). Lily’s act of painting in *To the Lighthouse* parallels Woolf’s act of writing. In other words, painting and narrating in this novel collapse into one another. Lily paints for the same reason (and at the same time as) Woolf writes: to create order out of chaos; to find the eternal and immutable in the “transient and the fleeting”; to make life stand still. In “The Lighthouse” Lily is reminiscing, looking back nostalgically and reliving past moments spent with the Ramsays, before, that is, Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew and Prue all died. In a passage that echoes a line from Eliot’s “Prufrock”—“I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”—Lily thinks, “How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was ... looking at her empty coffee cup. Mrs. Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too—repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her” (146). She then remembers her unfinished painting: “When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now” (147).

It is in and through painting—by “remembering, repeating, working through”—that Lily brings shape to her life (Brooks 298): “Repetition, remembering, reenactment,” Peter Brooks argues, “are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does” (298). For Lily, as for Woolf, it is through art that one “pervert[s] time,” and pursues “truth,” “that transcendent home” (298). It is through art that one balances the transient, contingent and fleeting forces of modern life with the eternal and the immovable. Lily, like Woolf, takes her art seriously. She didn’t like “playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at,” art (Woolf, *TTL* 149). While for Woolf it was the pen, for Lily “a brush” was the “one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos” (150). Throughout the course of the novel Lily comes to terms with the fact that, while people die, art endures. Lily “looked at her picture. That would have been his [Mr. Carmichael’s] answer, presumably—how ‘you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (179).

It was in a “moment of insight” (Steinberg 162), whether Mrs. Ramsay’s moment while serving Boeuf en Daube or Lily’s “catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern,” that Woolf felt something real could be found (Woolf, *TTL* 102). In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf wrote that each shock or moment of insight “is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words ... make it whole” (qtd. in Steinberg 162). Lily transmuted her “moment of revelation” by putting it on canvas (Woolf, *TTL* 147). She took the transient, the fleeting, the contingent and “ma[d]e it whole.” She made it into something that will endure.⁸

In *To the Lighthouse* art—the art of Lily Briscoe, and of Mrs. Ramsay, whose “life [is] a work of art”—functions as an equalizing force, a way of balancing (a “razor edge of balance” no less) “two opposite forces,” the transient and the eternal (161, 193). In a world where “There is no God” (207), in a “*place of fear and confusion*,” art is of paramount importance (Barth 32). Art, like the light from the lighthouse, like the light in Hemingway’s café, is the only light in all this darkness, a world of chaos, a “world of misery” (Woolf, *TTL* 47). What writing was for Woolf, and what painting is for Lily, is what music is for Sonny, in Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. *But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air.* What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. (137; emphasis mine)

Music, like painting and writing, like all Art, *attempts* to “triumph over life,” to express a Truth or some primal understanding or awareness about life that is necessary when confronted with a reality that is cold and often hard to bear. As Sonny puts it, “it’s not so much to *play*. It’s to *stand* it, to be able to make it at all. On any level ... In order to keep from shaking to pieces” (Baldwin 131; emphasis original). Like Sonny, Lily paints to impose order on an existential universe. And while Lily knows that her art—like Shakespeare’s dramas or Callimachus’s “handiwork,” in Yeats’ “Lapis Lazuli” (294)—may be “hung in the attics” or “rolled up and flung under a sofa” (Woolf, *TTL* 179), the desire, the need to capture an eternal, immutable truth through art will endure. Lily understands that “All things fall and are built again” (Yeats 294); she understands that “the vision must be perpetually remade” (Woolf, *TTL* 181). Yet, the speaker in Yeats’ great poem, “Lapis Lazuli,” would have us believe “those that build them again are gay” (295).

But the reality is that Woolf, an artist who spent her life making and remaking her vision, finally committed suicide. Woolf, like T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh and Oscar Wilde, abandoned the view that the light from the Lighthouse, the light of the café, the music from Sonny’s piano, or the music from the pipe of the Chinaman in Yeats’ “Lapis Lazuli,” were “enough!” (Woolf, *TTL* 65). Baudelaire saw art as a precarious balance between two opposing forces, the fleeting and the eternal. Eliot’s conversion to Anglicanism, like the religious conversions of Auden, Waugh, and Wilde,⁹ can be read, then, as a failure of art to “triumph over life.” It can be read as Eliot et al. opting for the “other” half of art—the eternal and the immovable—over the fleeting, the transient, the contingent.

When the belief in Art as a sufficient replacement for God (or an Absolute)—as a sufficient mechanism by which some measure of certainty can be attained—began to break down, Woolf bowed out all together; unlike Auden, Waugh, Eliot and, inexplicably, Wilde. The latter four, including Wilde on his deathbed, opted for the eternal and the immutable found in Christian faith. The feeling of *nausea* brought on by the realization that “things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them ... there is nothing” (Sartre 131) became too strong, and so they took the “leap of faith” that Kierkegaard argued, in *The Concept of Anxiety* and later in *The Sickness Unto Death*, is the only cure for dread. Woolf was unable to make this leap. When the transient, fleeting and contingent side of modernity simply overpowered Eliot’s, Wilde’s, Waugh’s, and Auden’s artistic sensibility; when the belief that art serves as a sufficient bulwark against the tide of modernity could no longer be sustained, they turned toward a religious system grounded in the eternal. Capitalist modernity and the concomitant affects of rationalism and industrialization, in effect, prevailed over the belief in the power of art to tap into Truth, precluding the possibility of finding in art that which is immutable. So religion became their refuge, their clean, well-lighted café. These poets could no longer imagine the three Chinamen of “Lapis Lazuli” happy, content to create art—capturing the eternal in the temporal (art) being the source of that happiness—in the midst of war and ruin, and the flux of the modern world.

In *The Creation of Value*, Irving Singer asks, do philosophers, poets, writers, or artists, what he calls “great achievers” (13), do they not “reveal how [life] can be turned into a work of art—not a comedy perhaps, or even a melodrama that has a happy ending, but a tragedy that plumbs the depths? Tragedies impose mythic and aesthetic coordinates upon some particular reality chosen for imaginative re-creation” (13). In the face of a tragic post-WWI world, and WWII looming on the horizon, Virginia Woolf, suffering deeply from ontological anxiety, was unable to make the “leap of faith”, and lost the energy to imaginatively re-create life as art. “Since the world arises out of nothing and will someday return to it,” as philosophers like Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, and Sartre, in *Nausea*, maintained, “nothing really matters” (Singer 74). If art no longer mattered, then for Woolf, neither did life.

What we now call postmodernism can be characterized by the abandonment of what Baudelaire called the “other” half of art, “the eternal and the immovable.” Postmodern artists do what Eliot, Waugh, Auden, Wilde and Woolf were unable to do. They’ve abandoned what Derrida calls “the concept of centered structure,” and have, one is lead to believe, learned to be comfortable with their anxiety, the uncertainty that comes with the transient, the fleeting and the contingent. Postmodern artists have given up the search for a whole, having given up the notion that there ever was a whole that, through the vicissitudes of modernization—the constant revolutionizing of the instruments of productions—became fragmented.

In *To the Lighthouse* we see Lily, and by extension, Woolf, struggling to find a center, struggling “in the midst of chaos” to find “shape,” a stable place on which to stand (161). It is through her painting that Lily is able to stave off the darkness: “With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (209). The intimation here is that this vision, though it captures the eternal and the immovable, “would be destroyed” (208). Like the darkness that awaits the old man outside the clean, well-lighted café, there is darkness beyond the lighthouse. But with this knowledge, indeed *despite* this knowledge, “one must force it on” (193), one must take up the brush, or the pen, “the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos” (150), and build again. As with Camus’ Sisyphus, one must imagine Lily happy.¹⁰

Such a vision, while certainly bleak, contains a modicum of hope. The point of the proverbial journey, as the saying goes, is not to arrive. Meaning, for modernists, is found in the search. It is found in the quest to re-fashion a whole out of an impossible number of “scraps and fragments” (Woolf, *TTL* 90).¹¹ It is found in the precarious balance between the fleeting and the eternal. To abandon the search, to abandon the journey *to* the Lighthouse, is either to accept the anxiety that comes with not having “something to base [a] vision on,” as postmodernists have done, or it is to embrace the Lighthouse and say, “It is enough!” And it is through Lily Briscoe’s, Mrs. Ramsay’s and ultimately Woolf’s search for something eternal and immutable *in* the transient, the fleeting, and the contingent that Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* has become a seminal work of literary modernism, and in its awful beauty, a transfusion for a worn-out world.

Notes

¹ See “A Gift of Wings (with reference to *Orlando*)” in Winterson’s *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (1995).

² From “Gubbinal,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1990).

³ Hereafter, *To the Lighthouse* will be abbreviated *TTL*.

⁴ Though Baudelaire doesn’t make this distinction, I understand literary modernism to be a response to capitalist modernity. For an account of this important distinction, see Chapter Two, “Modernity and modernism,” in David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), as well as Chapter Two, “Modernity and Modernism: 1900-1912,” in Malcolm Bradbury’s *The Modern American Novel* (1992).

⁵ According to Brian McHale, “the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*” (9). Modernist novels, then, ask epistemological questions such as “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it” (Higgins 101). One of the hallmarks of modernist novels is the search for answers to these questions, that is, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Not only do we see Lily and Mrs. Ramsay struggling to make sense of their worlds, but we witness Mr. Ramsey desperately trying to get to “R.” Other characteristic modernist devices deployed by Woolf are: “the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all the evidence through a single ‘center of consciousness’ . . . , virtuoso variants on interior monologue . . . , and so on” (McHale 9).

⁶ Mrs. Ramsay has much in common with Mrs. Bridge in Evan S. Connell’s gorgeous and underappreciated novel *Mrs. Bridge* (1959). A comparative reading of these two novels could prove illuminating.

⁷ As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), the elevation of instrumental reason above all other human faculties leads to Auschwitz.

⁸ In Woody Allen’s film *Interiors* (1978), Renata (Diane Keaton), a successful writer, begins to wonder if immortality through art is enough to make her life (and death) meaningful. It is easy to see in Renata the kind of doubt one imagines haunting Eliot, Auden, Waugh, and Wilde.

⁹ In the final chapter of his magisterial biography of Oscar Wilde, Richard Ellmann recounts the last moments of Wilde’s life, and his being received into the Church. On November 30, 1900, Robert Ross asked Wilde, who lay dying, if he wished to see Father Cuthbert Dunne. Wilde, unable to speak, simply held up his hand, which Ross interpreted as “yes.” “Dunne asked [Wilde] if he wished to be received [into the church] and he once more held up his hand. On this sign Dunne gave him conditional baptism, and absolved and anointed him” (Ellmann 584). Once Robert Ross “ferently declared that Catholicism was true” (583), to which Wilde responded, “No Robbie, it isn’t true” (qtd. in Ellmann 583). However, Wilde did, in fact, at one point, say that “Catholicism is the only religion to die in” (583), and three weeks before his death he told a *Daily Chronicle* correspondent that “I intend to be received [into the Catholic Church] before long” (583). The story of T.S. Eliot’s unexpected conversion to Anglicanism is a long and well documented one. Eliot’s early poetry, certainly up to *The Waste Land*, betrayed an allegiance to art, not religion. But with “Journey of the Magi,” “the poem of a convert” (Ackroyd 164), “Salutation,” and the sequence *Ash-Wednesday*, it was clear the direction of his poetry was changing. Like so many modernists, as Peter Ackroyd writes, Eliot was “aware of what he called ‘the void’ in all human affairs – the disorder, meaninglessness and futility which he found in his own experience; it was inexplicable intellectually (his own skepticism had taught him that) and could only be understood or endured by means of a larger faith” (160). Prayer, he once told Constantine FitzGibbon, “can give misery an apparent meaning” (qtd. in Ackroyd 161). And Stephen Spender tells how Eliot, “in the company of Virginia Woolf, tried to impart the significance of prayer, the attempt ‘to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God’” (qtd. in Ackroyd 161). But Woolf would have nothing to do with Eliot’s religious turn. In a letter to a friend, dated 11 February 1928, Woolf writes, “I have had the most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic believer

in God and immortality, and goes to Church...there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God" (qtd. in Pearce, *Literary* 131). Woolf also "said that [Eliot] had less credibility than a corpse" (Ackroyd 172). In 1934, Woolf openly denounced *The Rock*, Eliot's religiously themed verse drama, and argued "violently with him about his religious convictions" (219). Later, she told Spender "that Eliot seemed to be turning into a priest" (220). Like Eliot's, Evelyn Waugh's conversion from what he called the "absurd caricature" (qtd. in Pearce, "Waugh") of modernity to the "real world" of Catholicism was, Joseph Pearce writes, "greeted with astonishment by the literary world and caused a sensation in the media" ("Waugh"). In novels like *Vile Bodies*, published in 1930, the same year, incidentally, as his reception into the Catholic Church, he seemed openly to celebrate literary modernism. Indeed, *Vile Bodies* was dubbed "the ultramodern novel" ("Waugh"). Given the controversy surrounding his decision, Waugh succinctly explained the reasons for his conversion in his essay, "Converted to Rome: Why It Has Happened to Me" (1930). There, Pearce writes, he suggested that "the modern world was facing a choice between 'Christianity and Chaos'" ("Waugh"). Reminiscent of Baudelaire's formulation of modernity, for Waugh one had to choose between the eternal and the immutable or the transient, fleeting, and contingent. Like Eliot, Auden, and Wilde, Waugh chose the eternal and the immutable found in Christianity. In the final passages of *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel of redemption, we see what can be read as the narrator's second conversion; and at the same time, we see Waugh subtly renouncing the idea that art will lead us to paradise. In his youth, W.H. Auden was interested in Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism, an interest that waned with age. According to a Web page sponsored by the Academy of American Poets, while Auden never entirely abandoned these early interests, by the 1940s Christianity, and especially Protestant theology, had become a primary preoccupation ("W.H. Auden"). The best book length study of literary figures who converted to or were influenced by Christianity is Joseph Pearce's *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (1999).

¹⁰ The final two sentences of Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" read: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123).

¹¹ Like Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, Janie Crawford, in another important modernist novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, attempts to put the fragments of modern life together, and find, in the process, "a jewel down inside herself" (90). Zora Neale Hurston writes, "Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait. When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine" (90).

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