

**“Life, Stand Still Here”:  
The Function of Moments of Being in *To the Lighthouse***

**Austin Carter**

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**Professor Elizabeth Outka**

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Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is, in some ways, a novel of epiphany rather than of the quest that the title suggests. The characters continually find themselves having moments of great realization, in which they suddenly come to an understanding of some aspect of their life, in either a negative or positive light, all of which appear to be building toward one ultimate revelation; the narrative complicates this neat progression, though, by situating these moments as tiny cycles of revelation that happen within the context of a larger, continuous cycle. More importantly, the novel seeks a way to represent this process as the characters cycle through a series of moments of being. These moments, which seem somehow 'realer' than others, are what Woolf describes in her essay "A Sketch of the Past" as "moments of being" that are inevitably "embedded in many more moments of non-being" (70). That is, these moments of being are sudden, bright instances of clarity in which characters are able to see fully their own situation and can achieve a level of certainty and self-knowledge that they otherwise find themselves lacking. In *To the Lighthouse*, these moments of being serve a dual purpose: they allow characters the opportunity to "[make] of the moment something permanent" (Woolf *TTL* 161), and they create a space for true communication and communion, both between characters and within the self. In so doing, Woolf articulates the process of remembrance and of self-realization in a way that figures the self as a spiraling depth, where memories and moments (or "scenes," as she calls them) are constantly in the process of rising to the surface and then fading back into obscurity. Moments of being thus seem to represent the benchmarks of clarity as characters attempt to progress toward perfect communication in a linear fashion, but ultimately, the

narrative's structure resists linearity and instead figures these moments as part of a larger cycle of constant revelation.

*To the Lighthouse* features the artist Lily Briscoe's struggles to express her 'vision,' a term which encompasses both her thoughts and feelings about life with the Ramsays and her understanding of herself. The culmination of these moments is the realization of her vision, made tangible through the completion of her painting, which is ultimately tied to her sense of self, for art is portrayed as an expression of one's innermost thoughts and therefore requires a certain level of self-knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In using moments of being as significant markers in Lily's attempts to communicate her vision, Woolf tempts the reader to consider these epiphanies to be goals of paramount importance. Woolf complicates this reading, however, by filtering each moment of being through many layers of experience and through a temporal, rather than plot-based, progression; in so doing, she crafts a vision of life—and of *meaningful* life—that celebrates the process of realization rather than the epiphany itself. Moreover, Woolf figures moments of being as manifestations of the process of self-realization rather than ends in-and-of-themselves. In Lily's attempts to realize her vision (both in terms of her feelings towards the Ramsays and of her painting), she in some ways constructs her own identity, thereby suggesting that the self, like art, is part of an ongoing process of realization that is more important than the result.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Critic Mark Hussey asserts that "the relationship between life and art is an important and constant concern of Woolf's that once more bears on the question of the nature of the self. The tension in her work between faith in an autonomous self (or soul) that gives meaning to the world, and despair at the possibility that there is no such self anticipates an argument that is focused on in current critical thought" (xvi).

<sup>2</sup> Hussey notes that "One of the most salient points [Woolf] has to make is that the experience of being in the world is different for everyone and is endless, a process of constant creativity" (xiii). It is this process, then, that Woolf seeks to explore through moments of being.

In her unpublished 1940 essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf sets out to write a memoir but finds that the only way she can do so is to 'sketch' her brightest memories and draw forth a narrative from their pattern. To attempt otherwise, she claims, would be folly, as "it is so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen" (60). That is, she finds humans to be "immensely complicated" (69) and too nebulous to capture in any concise fashion. Instead, Woolf seeks to portray the isolated "exceptional" moments that create a through line in one's life while still acknowledging that "there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not" (69-70). Through this process, Woolf is able to make manageable the overwhelming "proportions of the external world" and, by describing only the exceptional moments "enclosed in vast empty spaces," can create a more comprehensive vision of the world (78).

Though Woolf seeks to flesh out more fully what she sees as human experience through the use of moments of being, she does not claim that she will ever be able to depict accurately all that experience entails. Rather, her moments of being gesture toward a greater clarity but do not make final summations. Critic Patricia Laurence, however, argues that Woolf's moments of being are also moments of silence that bring characters closer to a larger sense of being, in which they can "enter the obscurity" and "consult [their] own minds" (1) in order to understand the pattern behind the cotton wool. Laurence sees in Woolf's works narratives of silence that force the reader to consider the spaces "between islands of speech" (1), which form "points of suspension in the narrative and make 'moments of being'" (16). In so doing, Laurence argues, Woolf seeks to represent the "thoughts, words, and silence [that] are thus part of the pattern . . . in order to capture the moment 'whole'" (15). That is, Laurence sees the silence in Woolf's narratives as a gesture

toward the characters' momentary communion "with some 'whole' in nature, self, and 'reality'" (16); the silences express what words cannot, and they "[remove] certain moments in life from ordinary spaces and the limits associated with the physical world" (53). Indeed, Woolf does figure moments of being as "exceptional" instances operating outside of the typical non-being, but they are exceptional only in that they coincide with a sudden clarity that allows a character to see the connections between memory and understanding. Woolf's characters never truly capture the moment whole—instead, they find at best an understanding that the moment is constantly shifting and that more important is to understand this process of change; the only way to communicate accurately this understanding is through self-realization and the creation of art. Moreover, Laurence fails to address that though her characters might sink into introspective silence, *Woolf* does not; Woolf fills her characters' silence with her own words, giving voice to the thoughts they struggle to communicate and capturing, through her art, their moments of being.

The writing process here is important to Woolf, who notes that by capturing these moments of her own life, she is "doing what is far more necessary than anything else" (73). For, "it is only by putting [a memory] into words that [one can] make it whole," and in this wholeness, the memory loses its "power to hurt" (72). Ostensibly, Woolf speaks here mainly about traumatic memories (of which her life certainly was full)<sup>3</sup>, though this process can be used to describe the joy in successfully wrangling any thought onto the

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<sup>3</sup> Woolf notes especially her mother's death, which she saw as a transformative event that spread out from the center, altering both her past memories and her future thoughts: "The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn, and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. . . . [T]here was a struggle, for soon we revived, and there was a conflict between what we ought to be and what we were" (95). The tension here between truth and perception, past and present, understanding and a distinct lack thereof, can be tamed only through the creation of art, as Woolf does in her essay.

page. Woolf finds it a “great delight to put the severed parts [of memory] together” (72), which seems to value the ‘exceptional’ moments of being above the more forgettable moments of non-being or the frustrating moments of negation. Despite her apparent focus on these isolated moments, however, Woolf does not value any less the spaces in between. Simply arranging a collection of remembrances is not, she clarifies, “altogether a literary device—a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads” (142). Rather, it is the process of understanding and portraying these moments that creates some sort of meaning (though, it is important to note that there is never a neat, tidy ‘knot’ of meaning in Woolf’s work; just as every moment of being is tinged by a moment of negation, there is no meaning without the tension of meaninglessness). Through this understanding, Woolf constructs a view of the world in which “behind the cotton wool [of reality] is a pattern” that connects all people as parts of a greater “work of art” (72). *Here*, Woolf claims, is where hidden lies “the truth about this vast mess that we call the world” (72): that every person is inextricably connected to every other person, just as every ‘exceptional’ moment is surrounded by ordinary moments. It is in these connections that one is able to find meaning.

Yet Woolf does not figure these moments as static points in one’s life that provide a tangible, progressive structure for the self<sup>4</sup>; instead, she is concerned with using these moments as memories which circle back and build upon themselves in order to further emphasize the importance of process. Woolf conceives of both human consciousness and human existence as rather amorphous and unstable—where humans “are sealed vessels

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<sup>4</sup> That is, a model of self in which each new revelation brushes off a layer of the mysterious coating that prevents one from complete self-knowledge and moves one closer to the ‘great revelation.’

a float upon what it is convenient to call reality” but where “at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality” (142). This second ‘reality’ is somehow more real than the first, and it is in these floods that Woolf finds her moments of being. These moments, then, have a way of “always [coming] to the top; arranged; representative” (142), without being consciously called upon. By figuring consciousness in this way, Woolf emphasizes the fluidity of temporality, in which the past is constantly threatening to break through the surface of the present.<sup>5</sup>

This temporal instability complicates the process of capturing in words the “sense of movement and change” that surrounds any given moment—especially moments of being (79). Because every moment has the ability to resurface and reshape itself, it is “indescribable . . . for no sooner has one said this was so, than it [is] past and altered” (79). The fleeting, transitory nature of these moments seems to signify the futility of attempting to assign meaning while simultaneously making their inherent meaning all the more important; attempting to capture accurately this contradiction seems all but impossible. “The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being . . . I have never been able to do both,” Woolf states modestly (or perhaps disingenuously) in “A Sketch of the Past” (70), though this is precisely what she accomplishes time and again in *To the Lighthouse*. In fact, the nuanced portrayal of the tension between two seemingly contradictory states is a hallmark of the novel and one of its greatest strengths. By following Lily Briscoe’s creative attempts to finish her painting, the spiraled process through which Woolf explores the function of moments of being is revealed. As Lily experiences moments that serve as

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<sup>5</sup> In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes the fluidity of memory and temporality as “like the sliding surface of a deep river” (98). She says that in peaceful moments of the present, one “sees through the surface to the depths” and “[i]n those moments [she] find[s] one of [her] greatest satisfactions, not that [she] [is] thinking of the past; but that it is then that [she] [is] living most fully in the present” (98).

epiphanies—instances of clarity where she seems closer than ever to true communication—Woolf tempts the reader to value most highly these steps along the path to the ultimate realization. Throughout the novel, Lily gets closer and closer to realizing her vision in what seems like a linear progression, but each moment is steeped in both the memory of moments passed and imaginings of future, fuller moments while also standing in relation to the moments of non-being.

At the beginning of the narrative, Lily seems frustratingly unable to communicate her vision in any way. She takes up her brush and attempts to paint the bright flowers growing by the Ramsay home, and for a moment, it seems as though she will be able to portray it accurately. She notes the rich colors of the plant and then there, “beneath the colour there was the shape” (Woolf *TTL* 19). By this, Lily speaks not only of the physical shape of the flower—its petals, its stem—but also of what exists ‘behind the cotton wool.’ In this moment, Lily “[can] see it all so clearly, so commandingly” (19) and understands, for an instant, all that she must communicate in order to paint honestly this flower. But almost immediately, what appears to be a moment of being is shattered, for “when she [takes] her brush in hand . . . the whole thing change[s]” (19); in the process of attempting to communicate (“in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas” [19]), Lily is unable to keep hold of her vision. She feels that in this moment, “the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child,” thereby making it impossible for her to “maintain her courage” and insist on her vision, to say “But this is what I see; this is what I see” (19). Lily is paralyzed in the moment of setting her brush to canvas, as she sees suddenly that even this flower, a natural subject that should for all intents and purposes



stay relatively static, is constantly evolving and changing. With the realization that every moment represents a fleeting image that she will never be able to capture perfectly, Lily's anxieties swell to envelop every aspect of her life. She thinks of "her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road" (19), and in the spaces between Lily's words, the reader can hear Charles Tansley's old refrain: "Women can't write, women can't paint" (86). As Lily's thoughts spiral larger and larger, her worries threaten to consume her entirely, and Lily reaches a moment where she cannot understand and cannot explain them, even to herself.

Not only is Lily unable in this moment to express her vision of the flower, but she is also suddenly unable to understand what, exactly, it is she wants to express. She thinks, always, of Mrs. Ramsay—the subject of her painting—and wonders how she can ever express to her exactly how she feels:

[. . .] her impulse to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay's knee and say to her—but what could one say to her? "I'm in love with you?" No, that was not true. "I'm in love with this all," waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children. It was absurd, it was impossible. So now she laid her brushes neatly in the box, side by side . . .  
(19)

Here, Lily's frustration at not being able to communicate what it is that she feels is so overwhelming that it prevents her from attempting at all. She cannot articulate what it is that she loves, can only gesture toward it with vague approximations, and this is unsatisfactory. Woolf's prose here reflects Lily's thought process, as her internal narrative

swells like a cresting wave. Every time Lily reaches a moment where she might be able to understand what it is she feels, her thoughts (and the text) interrupt her, with parentheses and dashes, with rhetorical questions and dismissals. As Lily grows more frustrated, her thoughts trail off through a series of phrases separated by commas, her resolve weakening with every progressing thought, until finally she gives up altogether. It is not simply her love for Mrs. Ramsay that she wants to communicate, nor even the love she bears for the house and all its inhabitants, but rather, it is this *moment*, the culmination of everything up until this point, that she wishes to express. Yet just as she is able to grasp at her true emotion, she is struck by the realization that in the instant it would take for her to dip her brush in paint or to formulate the words to describe it, it will cease to exist in the same way. But by crafting this tantalizing moment in which Lily can see the shape and the truth of the flower, Woolf sets Lily's frustration against her desire to reach again that moment of clarity, thereby creating what appears to be a linear progression—if only Lily can move forward to the next moment of being, perhaps she will be able to understand and communicate more fully her vision.

Lily does, it seems, reach the next 'step' in the process of reaching true communication later in the narrative when she gains a sudden understanding of herself; the text complicates a reading of this moment of being as a linear progression, though, by filtering it through layers of memory and understanding that belie any sense of true progress. Whereas previously, Lily could not understand what it was that she wished to portray in her painting and also could not keep her self-doubts from encroaching upon her vision, when Lily later spends an evening sitting with Mrs. Ramsay, she somehow, "gathering a desperate courage" (50), sees herself clearly in the context of her world. As

Lily imagines the other members of the Ramsay household pitying her for being “an unmarried woman [who] has missed the best of life” (49), Lily now, as the night progresses, begins to “urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it” (50). She has a clear vision of herself as someone who enjoys being alone and who will not marry, and in this moment of clarity, Lily seems to grasp at the sort of confident self-knowledge that will help her finish her painting. This moment, however, does not happen in isolation. It is presented instead as a realization that happens over the course of the evening—she is “gathering” the courage, “would urge,” and would “plead” (50); these verbs speak of process and of a continual effort to achieve the self-understanding that Lily so desperately desires. The scene itself hovers between past and present. It is both Lily having the realization and remembering having the realization; she is sitting at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee while also remembering the time when she sat at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. The scene has happened, is happening, and will happen again, as Lily continues struggling to understand who she is and how this vision fits into the world.

For, at the same time that Lily gains an understanding of herself, she realizes also that Mrs. Ramsay simply cannot understand her, and Lily doubts whether she will ever be able to communicate this vision to Mrs. Ramsay; in so doing, her moment of being becomes a moment of negation. She remembers in that moment of clarity when she sat at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee how she “laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (50). Mrs. Ramsay, Lily realizes, will never be able to envision a destiny for Lily that falls outside the confines of marriage, just as Lily will never be able to see a future for herself that includes marriage. In her laughter, Lily thinks it

incredible that she should even *attempt* to explain herself to Mrs. Ramsay and begins even to wonder whether she could explain herself to anyone at all. She looks at Mrs. Ramsay, and thinks that “she had recovered her sense of her now—this was the glove’s twisted finger” (50). To whom each pronoun refers is unclear in the text: has Mrs. Ramsay regained her sense of Lily, or vice versa, or has one of the women gained a sense of herself? All, it seems, are happening in the same moment, and Lily wonders if Mrs. Ramsay does possess a greater knowledge than Lily herself does. She “[imagines] how in the chambers of the mind and heart of . . . [Mrs. Ramsay]. . . were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything” (51). With equal conviction, Lily knows that if they did exist, these tablets “would never be offered openly, never made public” (51). Even if Mrs. Ramsay did understand the patterns behind the cotton wool, so to speak, she would not be able to convey it to Lily any more than Lily could explain to her the “destinies which she completely failed to understand.” Even though Lily now possesses a clearer vision of what it is that she needs to express, she is no closer to communicating it than she was when she had no understanding; in fact, she wonders if anyone at all is capable of communicating to others what they know.

This frustration is replaced later in the narrative, as Lily experiences another moment of being, one that allows her to believe that she does have the ability to communicate with others. Importantly, however, this moment of being overlaps with a moment of negation, as Lily attempts to speak with Mr. Carmichael. She wishes to run up to him and “say not one thing, but everything” (178). The thought frustrates her, as “[l]ittle words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing” (178); “no,” Lily thinks,

“one could say nothing to nobody” (178). She says nothing, and in so doing, she returns to the moment when she laid down her paintbrush and felt too defeated to attempt any communication at all. Just as she wanted to express to Mrs. Ramsay her love of “this all” (19), she wishes here to ask Mr. Carmichael “about life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay” (178), but interrupts herself before she can speak, believing it futile to try. Words, as she says, cannot accurately capture her thoughts, and even if they could, Mr. Carmichael could not understand. But then, “a curious notion came to her that he did after all hear the things she could not say” (179), and Lily is overcome by a sudden moment of being in which she feels herself communicating with Mr. Carmichael and, more importantly, with herself and her painting.

Lily “look[s] at her picture” (179) and understands that her painting has the ability to communicate her thoughts—but that it will at best capture only one iteration of her thoughts. She and Mr. Carmichael and “you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she,’” she knows, will “pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (179). Art, she believes, will remain and will be able to share its artist’s vision with the rest of the world. Even though it might “be rolled up and flung under a sofa . . . one might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it ‘remained for ever’” (179). In this way, Lily’s art will ‘make of the moment something permanent’ and will capture her vision, even if it does not do so perfectly, and even though her vision might someday evolve(cite). She feels at once that she might successfully communicate her vision without encapsulating all she feels, and suddenly, “looking at the picture, she [is] surprised to find that she can not see it” (179). “Her eyes [are] full of a hot liquid” (179) as she begins to cry, blurring her vision in all senses of the phrase. She feels suddenly that if she were to “[get] up, here, now

on the lawn, and [demand] an explanation . . . then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape" (180), and that she would understand the meaning of it all—that she could finally realize her vision. But "nothing happened" (180), and Lily is left again in the liminal space between being and negation, though this time she bears still the hope that her painting might accomplish some, if not all, that it seeks to convey.<sup>6</sup>

Lily does, by novel's end, finish her painting, and in so doing finds both the realization of her vision and the understanding that her process of realization can never come to an end. Lily looks at her canvas "with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something" and knows that "it would be hung in attics . . . it would be destroyed" (208). She understands that though she "[has] had [her] vision" (209) (and, accordingly, has reached some previously unachieved level of self-understanding), her painting is at best an "attempt" at capturing her thoughts; as previously she knew that words could not be formed in adequate fashion to ask Mr. Carmichael for an explanation or to tell Mrs. Ramsay what she loved, neither could her painting sum up accurately all that she wanted to express. At one moment, she looks at the canvas and sees that it is "blurred," and when she looks back it is "as if she saw it clear for a second" (209), and she is able to draw the final line that completes her painting. Though paint might dry on the canvas, the end result does not appear to be the final realization it could be. As Lily "[lays] down her brush in extreme fatigue" (209), the text conjures previous images of Lily setting aside her brushes—moments which all seemed, at the time, to signal a culmination of her attempts to

<sup>6</sup> "But nothing happened" (180), Lily notes, just as she did during her earlier revelation: "Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee" (51). This repetition again emphasizes the cyclical process of revelation; despite her seemingly fuller understanding of how to communicate her vision, Lily is just as frustrated as she was when she could not communicate at all.

communicate. First she could not understand at all what it was that she wished to express, then she understood but could not communicate it to Mrs. Ramsay, then she felt she could communicate but that it would not say enough, and now she appears to be satisfied in 'completing' her painting. Yet in linking this final image with the previous images of Lily's process of realization, the text suggests again that her moment of being is one that will continue to develop and revise. Even though Lily's painting is completed just as the Ramsays reach the lighthouse and Woolf closes her novel, it seems as though the story is just beginning to unfold. This final moment is both a satisfying instance of finality and infuriatingly ambiguous, as it leaves the reader wondering what will happen next and what is the meaning of it all. In this way, the moment *is* a moment of being—it seems as though Lily (and by extension, the reader) has reached the end 'goal' of progression, in that she understands and has expressed all that she feels she can convey, but at the same time, the text suggests that the process has only taken a pause and will continue shortly. Indeed, Lily's painting, though she admits that it might be tossed away or destroyed, is only midway through its journey, for it now begins the second half of its process, as it attempts to communicate to others the meaning Lily imbibed in it; similarly, Woolf's novel is in the process of communicating with its reader, a process that continues each time its cover is opened.<sup>7</sup>

What, then, is the function of a moment of being? If it does not signal an instance where one can fully comprehend the mysteries of the world, and if it does not serve as a

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<sup>7</sup> Hussey, in *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, goes on to suggest that it is the *reader*, rather than the characters themselves, who experience moments of being in that they, through the act of reading, enact and recreate Lily's moment of artistic realization; he argues, then, that "[Woolf's] achievement is the creation of a literary that brings the transcendent into the actual, bring eternity into the world of time in the act of reading" (154). This claim, however, is perhaps too neat a summation of Woolf's work, in that it sidesteps the question of what, exactly, the characters achieve within the world of the text.

benchmark on the progression toward the ultimate realization, then what is its purpose? If moments of being represent instances where the cotton wool of non-being is lifted away, then the pattern that is revealed is recognized as constantly shifting. Though each epiphany grants Lily a fuller understanding of herself and of how to communicate her vision, each also shows Lily recognizing that every moment is indescribable and ephemeral; the thing itself is always shifting into its next form and can therefore never be 'truly' captured. To figure moments of being, then, as steps on a progression toward some final revelation is to miss both the nature of the moment and the process of getting from moment to moment. "The great revelation perhaps never did come," decides Lily (161); rather, there are "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (161). These little moments stack on top of one another as memories, resurfacing whenever they are most needed (both consciously and unconsciously). Accordingly, Lily recalls:

[. . .] 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 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. (161)

Even within this thought progression, Lily's internal narrative mirrors the process of realization; she pauses and interrupts herself in the midst of her own revelation, creating an effect that simulates the way every moment shifts constantly into a new form. Woolf



captures this ephemera with her text, but at the same time that she succeeds, she also reminds the reader that there is always more happening that cannot be captured. The moment is both frozen in and unhinged from time; the “eternal passing and flowing” is “struck into stability” even as it continues morphing.

Critic Julia Briggs notes that through her writing, Woolf wished “to re-create the constant changes of feeling that pass through human beings as rapidly as clouds or notes of music,” noting that these sorts of changes are “ironed out in most conventional fiction” (“Writing Itself” 164). In order to describe more fully these mutable sensations, Woolf required “not only a new language . . . but [also] a new hierarchy of the passions” (Woolf, qtd. in Briggs “Writing Itself” 166). That is, Woolf, in her “[concern] with how to represent consciousness and subjectivity” (Briggs “This Moment” 166), sought to reconsider how a writer must approach her craft, as any true or honest writing must convey the intensely complicated nature of a given moment, but especially of moments of being. It is precisely this futility that Woolf attempts to address in *To the Lighthouse* through the use of moments of being. Present, always, is a certain duality: every moment of being is also a moment of negation; characters are able to communicate most effectively when it seems as though they are not communicating at all; the permanence of a moment is found only in its temporariness. Through these tensions, Woolf is both able to find the holes in the fullness and to make of the emptiness something whole.

Briggs emphasizes the characters’ desire in *To the Lighthouse* to “create pools of tranquility in the midst of flux” (“Writing Itself” 174) through moments of being and through the creation of art. She views moments of being as isolated incidents that “[Woolf]

felt in their full presentness as meaningful” and against which “might be set moments of unmaking . . . when a set of meanings was loosed or unhinged, dissolved or dashed itself to pieces” (“This Moment” 126). In this reading, Briggs figures moments of being (and their parallel moments of negation) as solitary moments set apart from daily life; she argues that “for Woolf, such moments were linked with change, even with enlightenment . . . [and] they also brought sudden shocks, creating ruptures, gulfs, or chasms that severed the past from the present (“This Moment” 126). In this way, moments of being are read as breaks in the temporal narrative, or instances where ‘time stands still’ and where characters can find both meaning and permanence. Briggs argues that it is in these moments that “[Woolf] must cast her art” (“This Moment” 139), for “time brings change, and though the mind can move backwards and forwards across it . . . what has been lost can only be restored by the imagination and its arts” (182).<sup>8</sup> While the process of creating art is certainly integral to the novel, as evidenced by both Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily’s artistic leanings, the text itself resists the notion that art (and therefore self-realization, as the two are inherently linked) can happen only in the “chasms” created by moments of being. In fact, to sift out moments of being from the rest of the narrative and the ‘non-being’ and hold them separate is to ignore the process of getting from moment to moment which the novel seems to emphasize as more important. To say that art happens only during these exceptional moments is to value

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<sup>8</sup> Briggs notes: “And though memory runs backwards across breaks and ruptures, losses and changes, the ability to remember and relive past events cannot alter the fact that they belong to the past. Writing is one way of stemming a sense of human loss, a way of recovering the past, recapturing its moments of plentitude, restoring the decayed house and recalling the dead. Woolf formulates and re-formulates her various breaks and spaces in time because it is across time’s chasms, its gaps and fissures, that she must cast her art” (“The Moment” 138). Yet again, to unhinge these moments of being completely from time is to negate the careful weaving of temporality that Woolf embodies in her work; every moment of being represents a nexus of past, present, and future, and each moment builds on all others in a greater process of revelation and understanding.

moments of being over moments of negation or non-being, which the text is not willing to do.

Indeed, as Woolf's moments of being are so intimately connected with time, as they often envelop past, present, and future through the interplay between realization and memory, and as they are simply incapable of serving as stationary breaks in time, they cannot accurately be described as Briggs' "ruptures, gulfs, or chasms." Critic Meg Jensen agrees that moments of being are inherently linked to a temporal narrative, as she envisions Woolf as an author "intrigued by notions of time, space and consciousness" and for whom "the traditional plot-led structure of 'the novel' was a source of frustration" (112). As a result of this frustration, Jensen argues, Woolf sought to fashion a new form of narrative that more accurately represents "what it [feels] like to be alive" (112). In so doing, Woolf crafts "layer upon layer of narrative and linguistic scaffolding" that forces the reader to consider the past and future alongside the present moment, thereby suggesting "that there is more than one version of the past or one 'universal' pattern" (119). That is, Jensen envisions in Woolf's work a dichotomy between "two forms of experience, one progressive and one repetitive" (120), which results in characters becoming "stuck in the present and 'sitting still'" (124) as the persistence of the past prevents them from achieving any greater understanding. While there certainly are more competing versions of the past and differing universal patterns, the text itself does not seem to perceive this process of revision as a problem. Lily in particular is quite capable of holding in her mind many contradictory realizations—as outlined by her attempts to finish her painting, she experiences a series of revelations about if or how she could realize and communicate her vision, and rather than becoming 'stuck' in one iteration, she cycles through the process. No

one moment of being is any more valid than another; the moment when Lily brushes her final stroke on the canvas and believes that her painting is communicating all that it is able is just as real as the moment when she sets aside her brushes, thinking that she cannot communicate at all. That the past happens alongside the present does not prevent characters from moving along a linear progression toward some greater revelation—rather, it places emphasis on the process of realization and suggests that this process is ultimately more important than any final epiphany.

To separate out a moment of being as anything other than one aspect of a larger cycle of realization is to ignore or misinterpret some aspect of its nature. Even the phrase “moment of being” signals a tension between process and object. A “moment” is automatically temporal—a static break or a pause in time. “Being,” however, is more complicated, as it is at once a noun (a living creature), a state (the state of existence), and a verb (to exist; to be). Accordingly, moments of being in *To the Lighthouse* function in myriad ways; they represent moments of clarity, in which characters are able to come to some new understanding; moments of confusion or frustration, in which characters realize the futility of their attempts; moments when the cotton wool is lifted away and one can comprehend the greater pattern of the universe; moments when that pattern is revealed to be ever-shifting and inconceivable.

The common thread throughout is Woolf's emphasis on process. Just as Lily attempts again and again to realize her vision and come to a more complete understanding of herself and her emotions, she also recognizes that every revelation and every form of her art and her self is as honest and valid as the last. The “great revelation” never comes—the

only revelation that the text allows is that human existence is a state of *constant* revelation. In so doing, *To the Lighthouse* figures the self as undergoing constant revision, building on itself and filtering through time and memory in a way that adds to, rather than erases, previous iterations. This shifting, revising pattern that hides beneath the cotton wool of non-being, is what “[Woolf] might call a philosophy”:

[. . .][W]e—I mean all human beings—are connected with this [pattern]; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. . . . But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself (Woolf “Sketch” 72)

In figuring the self as a work of art, Woolf situates the self within a process of constant revision. In so doing, Woolf gestures toward a more poststructuralist view of the self, in which rather than possessing an inherent truth or meaning, it creates itself and is consistently changed and updated. Yet rather than accept only the most recent form, Woolf relates the connection between time and memory, signifying that the past is always present while at the same time allowing the possibility to “make of the moment something permanent” and find amid the ever-shifting cycles of revelation moments in which life can stand still.

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