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Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé

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# Our Toil Respite Only: Woolf, Diamond, and the Difficulty of Reality\*



*Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé*

There is nothing...that answers, or bears on, the problems of life. But the very fact that in these books, as we may imagine them, there are answers to every imaginable question can help us to transform our own desire for an answer to the problem of life. (Cora Diamond, "Introduction to 'Having a Rough Story About What Moral Philosophy Is'" 129)

In *The Phantom Table*, Ann Banfield examines Virginia Woolf's preoccupation—and that of Bloomsbury more generally—with the epistemological questions raised in Cambridge philosophy during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The era that provides the context for her inquiry is one Banfield places "squarely within the period of Russell, which ends with Wittgenstein's ascendancy." And yet, she continues, "this does not prevent the *Tractatus* [*Logico-Philosophicus*] from playing a role in our reconstruction of Bloomsbury's intellectual world," since its "conceptions, language and dominant metaphors find their counterparts in Woolf, not because she came under its influence, but because she shared its ways of thinking" (9).

Banfield astutely posits these shared ways of thinking (the result of fortuitous, perhaps *zeitgeistig* philosophical kinship rather than any direct mutual influence), and then lets them rest without pursuing

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them further. Such concerns, after all, fall outside the purview of her work in that book on Woolf's engagement with Russell, Moore and Fry, and the philosophical background of Bloomsbury. But accounting for salient affinities between the author of the *Tractatus* and his high-modernist literary contemporaries, especially Woolf, Joyce, Kafka, and Musil, has figured centrally in my own efforts to reframe understandings of the significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for studies in modernism more generally.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, my endeavors to bring out the shared ways of thinking Banfield points to are based not on direct parallel readings of Wittgenstein and Woolf, nor indeed on any full reading of the *Tractatus*. Instead, I read Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* together with philosopher Cora Diamond's writing on literature and moral life, writing that is nonetheless deeply marked by her inheritance from Wittgenstein. I first attend to Woolf's commitment (one I argue she shares with Wittgenstein) to grappling with what I take to be signature issues of modernism: question, quest, and a longing for vision or revised understanding as a way of confronting the difficulty of reality. I then probe Woolf's engagement with these issues by reading her novel in light of Diamond's essay "The Difficulty of Philosophy and the Difficulty of Reality." Diamond's keen insights about literature's capacity for ethical instruction, and her discussion in that essay of the experience of an ordinary sublime so painful or astonishing that

<sup>1</sup>Elsewhere I have offered more directly comparative readings of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the literary productions of these contemporaries. See, for example, "The Everyday's Fabulous Beyond: Nonsense, Parable, and the Ethics of the Literary in Kafka and Wittgenstein," and "The World as Bloom Found It: 'Ithaca,' the *Tractatus*, and 'looking more than once for the solution of difficult problems in imaginary or real life.'" In these essays, I argue that the so-called "resolute" or "New Wittgensteinian" interpretive approach to Wittgenstein scholarship developed by Diamond and James Conant puts us in a better position to recognize the kind of affinities Banfield points to. I argue that this program of Wittgenstein scholarship offers new dimensions for understanding Wittgenstein's relationship to literary modernism that are otherwise unavailable through more standard readings of the *Tractatus* (advanced by such philosophers as Anscombe, Hacker, Pears, Monk, for example). By emphasizing the relationship between the method Wittgenstein employs in the book and its unorthodox aesthetic form; highlighting the disjunction between the purported logical-philosophical treatise and Wittgenstein's conception of the overall ethical aim of the book; and by calling our attention to the different orders of difficulty and secular-sacred conversional aspirations at work in it, resolute readings put us in a position to see Wittgenstein's 1921 work of philosophy as a complex modernist puzzle as revolutionary in its literary sensibilities, formal ambition, experimentalism and dedication to everyday language's myriad possibilities and transformative yearning as the "big" works that we have come to see as exemplary of the high-modernist literary canon. For other notable studies on Wittgenstein in a modernist context, see Janik and Toulmin; Fischer; Perloff; North; LeMahieu; Mulhall; Gibson and Huemer; Matar, Ware, and Quigley.

it resists our understanding and categories of thought, illuminate a new philosophical context in which to understand more clearly and profoundly the stakes and aims of Woolf's novel.<sup>2</sup>

Reading Woolf alongside Diamond also prompts us to recognize important ways in which matters that lie at the heart of *To the Lighthouse* intersect with the Wittgensteinian preoccupations that inform Diamond's own thinking—concerns about the ethics of difficulty; skepticism about what other people think and feel; the search for communicative and existential clarity; the capacity of literature and fairy tale to convey a sense of beauty or of the “terrible” in the world; the status of expressions of our ethical experience as necessarily non-sensical; a longing for the sense of wholeness, transformative understanding, wonder, safety, and peace to stave off illusion or despair.<sup>3</sup> One important subsidiary effect of looking at Woolf and Diamond together is that doing so also allows us to make significant oblique connections between Woolf's thinking and Wittgenstein's, connections that continue to bring into focus the philosophical sympathies that attest to the mutual relevance of their peculiar brands of modernism.

I begin by locating the source of the connections among Woolf, Diamond, and Wittgenstein in their shared focus on difficulty, question and quest because as I see it, *if*, as Banfield asserts, Wittgenstein's dominant philosophical conceptions and metaphors find counterparts in Woolf, it is due in no small part to the fact that both authors labored under the influence of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and (at least in Woolf's case) Chekhov in their attempts to grapple with what Wittgenstein calls “the problem of life” (*TLP* 6.521).<sup>4</sup> These are writers that Woolf extols in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction” for their attention to the human soul and spirit. As Diamond reminds us, Wittgenstein's own admiration of Tolstoy (and the ways he draws upon that writer's methods in his own philosophy) owes in large part to his appreciation of the way Tolstoy deals with the difficulty of “the

<sup>2</sup>For extended discussion of Diamond's ethical thinking and the ordinary sublime, see Dahl.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussions of the larger lessons Diamond draws from Wittgenstein in her writing on ethics and literature, see especially Cray, “Introduction,” *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* and the essays compiled in that collection, and Mulhall.

<sup>4</sup>For another perspective on modernism's engagement with question and quest, see DiBattista. I attend more fully to DiBattista's arguments in that essay in my “The World as Bloom Found It.”

<sup>5</sup>Diamond points to Wittgenstein's preference for Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* to his *Resurrection* to indicate his partiality; for works that “turn their back on the reader” and antipathy to those which strive more heavy-handedly to tell us what to think or feel. See her “Introduction” 129. In spite of her admiration of the Russian philosophical

character of the world” and gives “a sense of the mysteriousness of life, and the way life goes...” in the absence of explicitly ethical statements about how we ought to reflect upon these things.<sup>5</sup> “Wittgenstein’s own ‘habit of reading,’” Diamond writes, “...was a reading for absences; and he writes absences, or so I am suggesting” (“Introduction,” 130–1). I will not be concerned with Woolf’s “Great Russians” here, but with her own investment in writing absences, and in keeping alive in her novelistic works the “inconclusiveness of the Russian mind” and what she describes as “the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined, life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair” (“Modern Fiction” 163).

Diamond’s approach to Wittgenstein, I argue elsewhere, allows us to see the *Tractatus* as a modernist puzzle text, one whose author uses a challenging parabolic mode of instruction in order to prompt his readers to take up the ethical and philosophical work that will (ultimately, ideally) lead them to make a change in worldview that will enable them to handle the most difficult questions of life and the search for solutions.<sup>6</sup> The book’s exegetical challenge plays a central role in Wittgenstein’s ethical project of engaging readers in the therapeutic activity of clarification he saw as philosophy’s true task.

Diamond reads the *Tractatus* not as representing Wittgenstein’s attempt to advance a metaphysical doctrine about the relation between language and world, but as a book striving to effect a radical change in the attitude the reader takes toward the world, and her conception of how philosophy should be practiced. According to the line of interpretation Diamond has elaborated along with James Conant, the *Tractatus* is not a work of doctrine, but a carefully wrought aesthetic medium for a mode of instruction Wittgenstein saw as serving an ethical aim. The work advances no theory, but instead offers readers

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novel and her claim that her own ideas amounted to a sort of “theory” (“Modern Fiction”) or a “philosophy” (*A Sketch of the Past*), Woolf, too, resisted systematic or institutionalized philosophies and was suspicious of novels that seek overt or un-nuanced applications of philosophical ideas. “[W]hen philosophy is not consumed in a novel,” she writes, “when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both.” “The Novels of George Meredith” (1918) 234. See also “Philosophy in Fiction” (1918).

<sup>6</sup>For further discussion of the *Tractatus* as a modernist puzzle, see my “The World as Bloom Found It.” For discussions of Diamond’s role in the development of what the “resolute” approach to Wittgenstein’s philosophy and the way that approach diverges from more traditional readings, see works by Diamond, Conant and Diamond, Cray and Read; Friedlander; Read and Lavery; and Cahill.

a mock-doctrine, one to be cast aside once it has served its elucidatory aim: of leading readers to eschew metaphysical theories and take up an attentive work on the self (work of a deeper sort of difficulty than the more straightforward intellectual challenge posed by his apparent logico-philosophical treatise) aimed at bringing about a conversational shift in outlook that will lead them to “see the world in the right way,” as he puts it (*TLP* 6.54).<sup>7</sup> The metaphysical theory the *Tractatus* would seem to proffer is one calculated to display to readers their

<sup>7</sup>Wittgenstein’s own characteristic lack of specificity about the precise nature of the kind of work on the self the *Tractatus* demands of its readers speaks to Wittgenstein’s own engagement in the modernist uses of vagueness that Megan Quigley explores in her 2015 *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* (though this salient instance of Wittgenstein’s use of vagueness is not addressed in that book). One can gain a better understanding of the kind of transformative personal work Wittgenstein has in mind by looking at his remarks collected in *Culture and Value* about character, courage and confession, as well as remarks Wittgenstein made in conversations with Rhees and Drury and those described in personal recollections of Wittgenstein by Fania Pascal and Rowland Hutt (See Rhees). Wittgenstein was interested in self-reflection and in first-person confessional expression as a means of warding off self-deception and evasion with clarity, acceptance and courage. His view that confession can play an important role in our efforts to take our lives in a new direction has much to tell us about the kind of ethical teaching he sought to impart to his readers in the *Tractatus*, since his views about the difficult process of self-assessment that confession and other forms of first-person disclosure entail bears a deep resemblance to the process of overcoming illusion toward which he aims to lead his readers. True, the *Tractatus* itself can hardly be called a confessional work. Among the numbered propositions that make up the book, we find neither the author’s personal reflections nor any hint of the factual account of his life that we might expect a strictly confessional narrative to contain. Wittgenstein engages in first-person expression only at the very beginning and the very end of the book, and then only in an extremely abbreviated fashion. And yet, Wittgenstein’s use of the first-person is not merely passing rhetorical move. In a conversation with Friedrich Waismann of the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein emphasizes the importance of his use of the first-person, describing it as “...something very essential,” “Here there is nothing to be stated anymore,” he continues, “all I can do is step forth and speak in the first person” (Waismann 117). Wittgenstein’s view of the importance of first-person voice reminds us that while the *Tractatus* is not, strictly speaking, a confessional work, it is nonetheless a book written from the point of view of an author who himself saw confession as a valuable move toward combating illusion and attaining in life the kind of clarity which he hoped would also carry over into understanding of language and philosophy. I want to suggest here that we take the jist of Wittgenstein’s remark at the end of the *Tractatus*—that it is only by overcoming our illusions, and thus also our tendency to engage in certain kinds of nonsense, that we can come to see the world aright—in light of his later claim that “confession has to be part of a new life” (CV 18). A point of agreement among Conant, Kremer and Cahill (who discuss the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* in terms of Kierkegaard, Augustine, and Heidegger respectively) is that Wittgenstein strives indirectly to foster virtues vis-à-vis our use of language by bringing us to see that we are responsible for speaking either sense or nonsense, depending on whether we give meaning to all of the signs in our propositions. The kind of authenticity associated with not fleeing this responsibility is connected to virtues like courage, character, humility, integrity, and honesty. For a different discussion of Wittgenstein and first-person expression, see Yi-Ping Ong, “Lectures on Ethics: Wittgenstein and Kafka,” in *Wittgenstein and Modernism*.

own misled tendency to succumb to an attraction to the metaphysical nonsense from which he aims to deliver them with the help of his book's strange method. Wittgenstein contrives a work of logico-philosophical nonsense to use as a metaphysical foil: He first draws readers temporarily into taking seriously the illusion that what he is saying makes sense, only then to explode this illusion from within, getting readers to recognize it for the illusion it is, by showing them that the sentences that have seduced them into thinking they make sense are simply meaningless.

Diamond argues that we will misunderstand Wittgenstein's aim and method in the *Tractatus* unless we take seriously his enigmatic claim at the end of the book that all of its constitutive sentences are "simply nonsense" (*TLP* 6.54).<sup>8</sup> Taking Wittgenstein at his word on that count means working to overcome our attraction to these sentences as he says we should. For Diamond, we really are to throw them away—along with the figurative ladder Wittgenstein invokes in the book's penultimate proposition—once they have served what he claims is their "clarificatory" transformative purpose of leading us out of our philosophical and personal confusion. For Diamond, it is not the book's nonsensical propositions that we must try to understand (they are nonsense; there can be no understanding them) but their *author*, a self-conscious utterer of nonsense who aims to teach the reader "to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (*Philosophical Investigations* §464). To understand this speaker of nonsense, as any other, we must "enter imaginatively," as she describes it, into what it would be to take nonsense for sense:

...the *Tractatus*, in its understanding of itself as addressed to those who are in the grip of philosophical nonsense, and in its understanding of the kind of demands it makes on its readers, supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it. If I could not as it were see your nonsense as sense, imaginatively let myself feel its attractiveness, I could not understand you. And that is a very particular use of imagination ("Ethics and Imagination" 158).

Building upon Diamond's approach to Wittgenstein within studies of Woolf allows us to attend to the mutually enlightening ways in which both writers are enlivened by modernism's trademark difficulty

<sup>8</sup>At *TLP* 6.54, Wittgenstein writes: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly."

on the one hand, and, on the other, by a less-explored aspect I argue is equally definitive: secular high modernism's seemingly incongruous attraction to varieties of spiritual and transcendent experience, manifested in an obsession with the transformative power of puzzles, riddles, unanswerable questions and quests for solutions. Woolf's and Wittgenstein's deployment of difficulty bears on the ethical weight of their decidedly secular-spiritual engagement with ordinary language and life—as something fraught with inconclusive or illusory searches for meaning, the contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* (*Tractatus* 6.45) and coming to “see the world in the right way” (*Tractatus* 6.54), in Wittgenstein's terms, and grasping the vague and elusive “IT” that is the deictic object of so much contemplation and search in Woolf.<sup>9</sup>

On February 27, 1926, for example—around the time she was composing the scene of Mrs. Ramsay's solitary meditation in “The Window” section of *To the Lighthouse*—Woolf expresses her own attraction to questions and quests for the peace of discovery and resolution, and a longing for what Wittgenstein calls the “mystical feeling...of the world as a limited whole” (*Tractatus* 6.45):

...I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say “This is it”? My depression is a harassed feeling. I'm looking; but that's not it—that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Square last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds and the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is “it.” It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved. A sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth is there too: of the infinite oddity of the human position; trotting along Russell Square with the moon up there and those mountain clouds. Who am I, what am I, and so on: these questions are always floating about in me: and then I bump against some exact fact—a letter, a person, and come to them again with a great sense of freshness. And so it goes on (Diary III 62–3).

Diamond's attention to riddle and difficulty in modern letters extends beyond her focus on Wittgenstein's peculiar use of difficulty in the *Tractatus*. For it also informs her moral thinking about the way literature like Woolf's deals in unexpected ways with difficult ethical questions, asking its readers to deal with them in turn. The work of gaining clarity about oneself (and of coming to understand others and what is at stake in what they say, even when what they say

<sup>9</sup>For a longer notebook meditation on seeing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, see Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 4.



makes no sense to us) that the *Tractatus's* use of nonsense and overall transformative challenge requires on Diamond's reading, involves a different, and deeper, sort of difficulty than the more straightforward intellectual challenge the logico-philosophical treatise poses on the surface. The difficulty both Wittgenstein and Woolf present in their works is expressive of a yearning for solutions to what Joyce's Leopold Bloom refers to in *Ulysses* as problems "of a different order of difficulty" (699). Such problems are related to the vast irresolvable questions of life's meaning that Wittgenstein explores in the *Tractatus* (6.4312–6.521) and which, as Lily Briscoe puts it in *To the Lighthouse*, "traverse the sky of the soul perpetually" (164–5). Problems of this order exceed the multiple intellectual challenges or calls for erudition the self-consciously crafted "Big Works" of high modernism also notoriously entail. At stake within them is a search for answers to the enduring questions of existence: the meaning of life, problems of the self and other minds, the possibility of redemptive change, the contrast between ordinary life and language and its significance from the point of view of the higher. The longing for answers Woolf and Wittgenstein both tap into in their very different works is further complicated by their common tendency to "see every problem from a religious point of view," as Wittgenstein once put it, in spite of their committed agnosticism or atheism (Drury 79).<sup>10</sup>

Woolf's investment in question and quest is evident even in the most rigorously analytical searches conducted in her novels (think, for example, of Mr. Ramsay's quest for successful logical-philosophical progression from A to Z, or—failing Z, to R) (37–38). Most notable is Lily Briscoe's quest for fulfilling (even vindicating) creative vision and the longing for access to the mysterious private buzzing 'hive' of the other that she shares with the rest of the novel's main characters vis-à-vis each other (55). Each of the searches that wend their way through the novel are fueled by an inchoate underlying desire to get at "it" by, as Woolf puts it in *Orlando*, "netting the wild goose," the "fin in a waste of waters;" to make some kind of leap of faith or transformative shift able to bring about an enhanced clarity of outlook and understanding of life and the human condition, or at least peace from pain, loss and isolation (10–11). This (sometimes active, sometimes latent) yearning persists even in the presence of a more despairing intellectual recognition that no such transformative solutions to what

<sup>10</sup>For a fuller discussion of Wittgenstein's remark to his friend and former student, Maurice Drury, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view," see Winch.

Wittgenstein describes in the *Tractatus* as the “riddle of life” are surely, entirely, permanently achievable (*TLP* 6.4312; 6.5).

For just as Woolf’s avowed lack of religious belief does not preclude her tendency to see problems from the “religious point of view” shown in her desire to represent a human yearning for a certain ethico-spiritual engagement with the world, her doubt that the answers to life’s most nagging questions are attainable likewise does not prevent her from giving in to the temptation to pose these questions in a variety of possible formulations over and over again in her writing. The doubtful sense *Jacob’s Room’s* narrator voices in the pronouncement that “the problem is insoluble,” a sentiment Mrs. Ramsay echoes in *To the Lighthouse*, exposes the tension between hopeful longing and despair that characterizes the kind of questioning her works explore (*JR* 64; *TLH* 18).<sup>11</sup>

This tension is also evident in Woolf’s interludes about the visionaries in the apocalyptic “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*, in which she compresses time and dissolves the human ego into the sleep and dream of an historicized post-lapsarian night of the chaos of the Great War. In a Wittgensteinian vein, in the inter-chapter Woolf simultaneously evokes romantic transcendental visions of wholeness and mystical labor and deflates them as mere illusion:

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only. (131–2)

At privileged epiphanic moments, the curtain of appearances is parted to reveal to humankind a sense of yearned-for peace, resolution, harmony and completeness (as recompense for our penitent toil). But divine providence imparts only brief, intermittent flashes of the mystical wholeness sought. The metaphysical questions posed by the figure of the visionary seeker of “Time Passes” remain indeterminate and unanswered. The many fragmented questions that accumulate

<sup>11</sup>See *TLP* 6.5 “For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it can also be answered.”

in Woolf's oeuvre—here from *The Years*, for example: “Why—why—why?” “Where did thought begin?” “Am I that, or am I this?” “Are we one, or are we separate?”—are presented “as if a puzzle were solved, and then broken” (133; 140; 160). Questions “as to what and why and wherefore,” “where to begin?,” “where are we going?,” “how do you explain it all?,” “What does it mean then, what can it all mean?” proliferate throughout *To the Lighthouse* (132; 161; 169; 182; 149). The elusiveness of the answers sought in the reiterated questions of “Time Passes” is something Woolf goes on to detail with self-conscious humor in *Orlando*:

Having asked then of man and of bird and the insects, for fish, men tell us, who have lived in green caves, solitary for years to hear them speak, never, never say, and so perhaps know what life is having asked them all and grown no wiser, but only older and colder (for did we not pray once in a way to wrap up in a book something so hard, so rare, one could swear it was life's meaning?) back we must go and say straight out to the reader who waits a tiptoe to hear what life is—Alas, we don't know. (271)

And as *Orlando* draws to a close, having reached “the present moment,” the wild goose still flies overhead, still sought, still unreachable. Woolf's narrative thus works to keep its central enigmas intact. To questions like “...of what nature is death, and what nature life?” the narrative offers us answers like this: “Having waited well over half an hour for an answer to these questions, and none coming, let us get on with the story” (68).

## II. The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy

According to Diamond's reading, as I have described it, the *Tractatus* aims to lead readers out of philosophical and personal confusion and complacency and through a conversational process that would culminate (at least ideally) in an enlightened understanding and clearer vision of the world, life, philosophy and language. As I will emphasize shortly with reference to Diamond's “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” however, certain ideas that stem from Wittgenstein's (and Cavell's) thinking also point us toward instances in our experience of reality—the everyday reality that the *Tractatus* would have us see more clearly—when reality is such that it becomes somehow strangely resistant to our comprehension. And that this experience of non-clarity, indeed of unintelligibility, is (if paradoxically) a significant part of the everyday we struggle to see clearly. As I will show, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* explores the ways in which the

individual experience of an overwhelming sense of the difficulty of reality isolates people from each other. But her novel also points to ways in which insights into the experience of such difficulty can bring people together.

Woolf's (and Wittgenstein's) attraction to riddle, enigma and unanswered questions flourished under the influence of the work of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that took hold during the years of WWI, modernism's cataclysmic epochal event.<sup>12</sup> The First World War is also, of course, a central theme in Woolf's three major novels of the 1920's: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. The devastating losses wrought by war and the everyday ravages of time's passing haunt *To the Lighthouse* as a whole (Andrew, the oldest son of the Ramsay's eight children, whose promise Mrs. Ramsay so anxiously strives to safeguard, is, we are told, "killed by the splinter of a shell instantly" (159)).<sup>13</sup> This news is delivered in the well-known brackets Woolf uses to report all the devastation that befalls the family during the ten intervening years as time passes between the novel's first part, "The Window" and its last, "The Lighthouse." In another bracketed report, the Ramsay's oldest daughter, Prue, dies in childbirth. But in

<sup>12</sup>In her *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Marjorie Perloff reads the *Tractatus* as a "war book," the product of specific, historical circumstances (45). Indeed, the book was finished while Wittgenstein was fighting on the Eastern front and as a prisoner of war in Casinò, Italy. During that time, Wittgenstein turned for solace to Tolstoy's *Confession* and *Gospel in Brief* and was an avid reader of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (his habit of carrying *The Gospel in Brief* with him at all times on the Front earned him the moniker, "the man with the Gospels"). The kind of personal transformation Wittgenstein strove to attain while in daily confrontation with death at the Front and long after the war's end (indeed, throughout his life) also surfaces as a strong theme in his philosophy. Ray Monk suggests that if Wittgenstein had spent the entire war behind the lines, the *Tractatus* would likely have remained what it was at its first inception of 1915: a treatise on the nature of logic (137). Remarks that show the ways of thinking Wittgenstein shares with Woolf, remarks having to do with grappling with the meaning of life; transcendence, epiphanic insight, "the mystical," the will, fate and about riddles and searches for solutions, first begin to appear in Wittgenstein's notebooks (many of which are to be found in the final version of the *Tractatus*) only after he went to the front in 1916, taking Tolstoy and Dostoevsky along with him.

<sup>13</sup>In another essay, Diamond takes as a literary example Woolf's account of Andrew Ramsay's death ("A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous") to bring out a point of resemblance between Wittgenstein's writing about philosophy and mathematics and her own interest in expressions of ethics that involve few (if any) specifically moral words. Woolf's sentence—which as Shuli Barzilai claims "serves to underscore (because, and not in spite of the inexact number) the importance of one particular life for one mother, one wife, or one friend"—Diamond points out, "might be a record of what happened, might express moral thought—which, depends on its use." See Diamond, "Wittgenstein, Mathematics and Ethics: Resisting the Attractions of Realism" 244.

spite of Mrs. Ramsay's repeated exhortations to her "old antagonist, life," to "stand still here" in an impossible suspension of coherence and still-life plenitude, each of the children whose innocence and promise Mrs. Ramsay so longs to protect must in the end (whether literally or figuratively), "grow up and lose it all" (63, 62). Mrs. Ramsay's almost uncanny preoccupation with this eventuality exceeds a simpler sense of a mother's anticipatory nostalgia, something that any form of consolation or "realistic" rational perspective could stave off. Hers is a prescient apprehension of the truth of life as offering no such longed-for safety, no salvation, as something "terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance" (63). As Mrs. Ramsay perceives it,

...the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed to repeat...I am guarding you—I am your support...at other times suddenly and unexpectedly...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...that it was all as ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (19–20)

Mrs. Ramsay's yearning for the solace of a religious belief in what Wittgenstein refers to as "absolute safety," expressed during a moment of solitary meditation in an incantatory series of repeated phrases ("Children don't forget, children don't forget"...It will end, it will end...It will come, it will come"), culminates in an automatic utterance which surprises and dismays her: "We are all in the hands of the Lord" (66).<sup>14</sup> She retracts this phrase just as quickly as a bit of nonsense, or at least an "insincerity slipping in among the truths" (67). For the language of religious salvation cannot comfort her either. The yearning for safety and stillness Mrs. Ramsay craves in her moment of de-personalized solitude becomes a longing for unity and coherence during the famous dinner of *Boeuf en Daube* that she carefully and anxiously orchestrates for her family and their invited guests toward the end of "The Window." Seated together by candlelight around her daughter Rose's inspired centerpiece creation, perplexing in its strange (and impermanent) beauty, the members of the dinner party

<sup>14</sup>In his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein offers two examples that represent for him the "experience *par excellence*" of ethical or absolute value. The first is the feeling of "*wonder at the existence of the world*" and the second is the "experience of feeling absolutely safe" (41–2). Both sentences are nonsense, representative of the "characteristic misuse of our language [that] runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions" (42). See also Diamond, "Wittgenstein on Religious Belief: The Gulfs Between Us."

are transformed into an illuminated modernist still life that gives their hostess passing comfort. For Mrs. Ramsay,

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she had hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more, and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (107)

But the still life is soon shattered; a pear (its shape reminiscent of Prue's own doomed fecundity) is grabbed and consumed.<sup>15</sup> That the view of life Wittgenstein describes as *sub specie aeternitatis* is only an illusion, however ardently longed for, is something Mrs. Ramsay already knows. Toward the end of "The Window," Mrs. Ramsay looks back over the threshold at the fading communal dinner scene and pronounces it "already the past" (114). Her longed-for sense of safety, wholeness, stillness and suspension of time is something she only achieves in the novel in the stark tableau of death that Woolf gives us shortly after. In the characteristically compressed and abrupt fashion of "Time Passes," we get this report: "[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]" (132).

This bracketed remark follows directly on the heels of one of the main instantiations of the poignant disembodied narrative of "questioning and wondering" that becomes so pressing and prolific in "Time Passes" (130). Here, the experience of a harrowing difficulty of life is conveyed in an outpouring of fragmented questions whose answers

<sup>15</sup>I owe my recognition of the relationship among the disruption of the still life, the shape of the pear and the shape of Prue's fate to discussions with Elizabeth Abel.

are always pending. In a downpouring of immense darkness, as lights and lives are extinguished and the cyclical lapping of sea waves inexorably erodes the sands on which the characters once stood, a chorus of mystic visionary questioners paces the beach to “ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed...” (137). They seek to assuage their solitude in a quest for answers. Woolf writes:

Should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes ready to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. The hand dwindles in his hand; the voice bellows in his ear. Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer. (132)

Later in the interlude, Woolf writes:

That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and...to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken. (138)

These passages call attention to what I have been describing as Woolf’s treatment in *To the Lighthouse* of a general sense of yearning for (always elusive) consoling answers to the big enduring questions of life. The first passage also speaks to a desire—one related to Mrs. Ramsay’s own—to fly in the face of the “terrible” in the world by exerting a certain control over how things happen in it. The second passage from Woolf quoted above speaks of an “unendurable contemplation,” presenting a difficulty of understanding (and a loss of correspondence truth) in the figure of a broken mirror. These passages articulate problems related to the will and to the self’s unrecognizability to itself and to others. In doing so, they underline both Woolf’s narrative experiments with Russian-style questioning and her engagement with what Martha Nussbaum—in her essay on *To the Lighthouse*—calls the “venerable problem” of other minds, as well as with the character of human separateness that preoccupies Cavell (732).

Mrs. Ramsay’s outlook of joyful acceptance and coherence during the dinner scene, coupled with her desire to stop time and make the world reflect the “compass of the soul” is one we can view in terms of the Grimm tale, “The Fisherman and His Wife,” that Mrs. Ramsay reads distractedly and intermittently to her son, James, in the first part of the novel. The Grimm story offers us an important intertextual point of contact between Woolf and Diamond. For it is to this same story that Diamond turns in her “Ethics, Imagination and the

Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" in order to explore the sense of the "terrible" and of terrible evil as it works upon readers of the fairy tales that Wittgenstein found to be ethically powerful. Her discussion of the ethical weight of that tale is also meant to clarify Wittgenstein's sense of the attitude toward the world he describes as "happy" (or in terms of its "unhappy" opposite) in the *Tractatus* and the notebooks he kept as he was writing it.

In the Grimm story, a fisherman captures an enchanted flounder and spares its life. Upon his return home, his wife, Ilsibil, demands he return to the flounder to ask him to grant her what quickly becomes a long series of wishes. Her initial desire to trade in her filthy shack for a cozy cottage soon gives way to wishes for increasing material wealth and power; first she demands to be king, then emperor, then pope. On the day she wakes up unable to bear that the rising and setting of the sun and the moon are beyond her control, she sends her reluctant husband back to the flounder with her final angry command that she "become like God." The command elicits a supernatural gale and the wife's abrupt return to her original squalor (Grimm 72–80).

For Diamond, the wife in the story, and what she goes on to want and to do, shows us the character of someone who takes an "unhappy" attitude toward life and the world as a whole that she argues is so central to Wittgenstein's conception of ethics. A "happy" attitude is marked by an "acceptance of the independence of the world from one's will...the acceptance of the fact that what happens, happens, that one's willing this rather than that is merely another thing that happens and that one is in a sense 'powerless'" ("EIMT" 154). In Ilsibil, however, we get a figure filled with "a deep dissatisfaction with the world's not meeting the conditions she lays down" ("EIMT" 166). Diamond goes on to articulate the sense of "something terrible and sinister" that arises in her reading of "The Fisherman and his Wife," starting from Ilsibil's very first wish. This sense of terrible evil has nothing to do with that wish on the surface—there is nothing particularly terrible, after all, about wanting to live in a clean cottage rather than a hovel. But Diamond suggests that the Grimm story presents us with

<sup>16</sup>In his notes on anthropologist James Frazer's description of 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish rituals of sacrifice, Wittgenstein shows his own sense of the difference between natural and supernatural evil that Diamond points to. In his discussion of ritual and religious practice, he makes clear his interest in cases that might lead us to ask "whence the sense of something dark and terrible in what at one level may seem entirely innocent?" Wittgenstein writes: "I want to say: The deep, the sinister, do not depend on the history of the practice having been like this, for perhaps it was not like this at all; nor on the fact that it was perhaps or probably like this. Indeed, how is it that in general human sacrifice is so deep and sinister? ...No, the deep and the sinister do not become



evil that functions on a variety of different levels.<sup>16</sup> She distinguishes evil of a more mundane, inconsequential stripe—the kind of evil that lies “close to home,” something one might get used to, and evil that represents “something terrible, black and wholly alien that you cannot even approach” (“EIMT” 166). The sense of evil Grimms’s story gives us seems “to be justified by nothing that is as it were available on the surface of events....we have a sense of something dark and terrible ‘within,’ as we might say” (“EIMT” 167).

Mrs. Ramsay’s benign will to control time and tide is, of course, also to be contrasted with what Diamond depicts as the more malevolent grabbiness of the fisherman’s wife. What distinguishes Mrs. Ramsay from the wife in the Grimm story is her consistent acknowledgement in Woolf’s novel of the world’s refusal to conform to any conditions she might lay down for it. This difference lies in her acceptance of the difficult reality that the sun and the moon will go on rising and setting even without her say-so. Yet I would argue that Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of fate is intimately connected to the fairy-tale ethics of the cosmic “terrible,” magical sea-churning force that the Grimm story gives us, a sense of “something terrible, black and wholly alien” that Diamond is keen to call our attention to in her discussion of the moral weight and imaginative capacity of the story (“EIMT” 166). The solemn attitude of possibility, acceptance and peace that Mrs. Ramsay adopts in her moment of plenitude during the dinner scene in “The Window” is one of attachment and loyalty. Hers represents a “happy” attitude toward the world as a whole, in Wittgenstein’s sense. It goes without saying that Mrs. Ramsay does not represent the agent of terrible blackness that Ilsibil does in Diamond’s reading of the Grimm story. But in giving us a character so attuned to an uncanny force of the terrible in the world, Woolf nevertheless presents us with a proximity to what Diamond calls “the difficulty of reality.”

In “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” Diamond builds upon Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s ideas about the nonsense of expressions of ethical experience and the difficulty of understanding others to add another dimension of perplexity to the “different order” of difficulty I have already outlined above. This difficulty entails a bewilderment capable of stifling our hopeful or even

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apparent merely by our coming to know the history of the external action, rather it is *we* who ascribe them from an inner experience. [...] When I see such a practice, or hear of it, it is like seeing a man speaking harshly to someone else over a trivial matter, and noticing from his tone of voice and facial expression that this man can on occasion be terrible. The impression that I receive here can be very deep and extraordinarily serious.” *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* 146.

our most hopeless interrogation and yearning to grasp the difficulties of the world, and which replaces it with a stranger sense of woundedness, confoundedness and isolation. It is a difficulty that has to do, in Woolf's words, with an "unendurable contemplation" that stops us in our tracks with a complete inability to grasp reality at all. "A difficulty of reality," for Diamond,

...is the experience in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. *We take things so*. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present that kind of difficulty, of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one's head around. ("Difficulty" 45-6)

Diamond's essay seeks primarily to engage philosophically with J.M. Coetzee's Tanner Lectures (which were later to form a part of his 2003 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*), and a set of philosophical responses to them now compiled in *The Lives of Animals*. Although she offers several literary examples from Czesław Miłosz, Ruth Klüge and Mary Mann to explore the range of phenomena she is concerned with, her notion of the difficulty of reality is rooted in a literary example associated with aspects of World War I that also inform both Wittgenstein's and Woolf's work: Ted Hughes' poem "Six Young Men," written in the late 1950's.

At the heart of the poem is a 1914 photograph of six smiling men, seated in a spot intimately familiar to the speaker and eerily unchanged. All are profoundly alive: yet within six months of the snapshot, all are dead. Hughes' poem captures life and death simultaneously in the fading keepsake exposure superimposed upon the "flash and rending" of war that falls onto these smiles now forty years "rotting into soil." But Hughes brings out in the last stanza the horrible permanent contradiction that Diamond takes to the heart of her notion of a difficulty of reality:

That man's not more alive whom you confront  
 And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud  
 Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,  
     Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;  
 No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:  
 To regard this photograph might well dement.  
 Such contradictory permanent horrors here  
 Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out  
 One's own body from its instant and heat. (54-5; qtd. in "Difficulty" 44)

What interests Diamond about the poem is not the way it grapples with the wonder at the world and yearning to understand it that Woolf thematizes throughout her novels (and which Wittgenstein offers as his example of his experience *par excellence* of ethical value in his “Lecture on Ethics”) but with the experience of a sudden inability of the mind to encompass something which it encounters, the experience of near-madness in trying to bring together in thought what can’t be thought: the impossibility of anyone’s being more alive than these smiling men, and of nothing’s being more dead (“Difficulty” 44).

It is plainly possible, Diamond tells us, to describe the photo in Hughes’ poem so that it does not seem mind-boggling at all: here we have a snapshot of a group of men who died young in battle not long after the photo was taken. If we look at the picture that way, there is no problem about the adequacy of our concepts to describe it. The person faced with a difficulty of reality, however, finds himself isolated in linguistic and personal bewilderment, utterly *shouldered out*, in Hughes’ words, from his ordinary ways of comprehending the world and what happens in it. No amount of explanation can put into perspective this “shuddering awareness of living in the contradiction of death and life together” (“Difficulty” 73).

A difficulty of reality has to do with the capacity of reality not just to exceed our conceptual grasp but to present an agonizing inexplicability, a resistance to our ordinary modes of thinking and talking. It is a difficulty marked by a coming apart of thought and reality, a *repudiation* of the ordinary that is nonetheless a feature of ordinary life, one that belongs to a flesh-and-blood everyday.

In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf claims that writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky see into this flesh-and-blood everyday “further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision.” In her own critical writing, she proposes new approaches to correcting the blindspots and myopia she sees as characteristic of the novels of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She calls for an improved focus on aspects of everyday life that novelists have previously ignored in their efforts to offer robust descriptions of reality. “Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this,’” she writes. What she wants (from both an aesthetic and an ethical point of view) is “a different outline of form...difficult for us to grasp,” incomprehensible to her “materialist,” Edwardian predecessors (“Modern Fiction” 160–2). If modern novelists are to be realistic about “the spirit we live by, life itself,” they must learn to move beyond established convention, to attend to “the life of Monday

or Tuesday” in such a way as to “tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” (“Modern Fiction” 160; “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 54). To faithfully represent “the thing we seek,” something she describes (admitting further indexical “vagueness”) as “life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing,” writers must look after the “little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time.” They must turn their attention to the moments when “life escapes,” when it veers off course, refusing to be contained by traditional narrative and linguistic conventions (“Modern Fiction” 159–60). For Woolf, realistically representing the complexity and mystery of human character and “what life is really like,” means focusing on the oddities and anomalies of everyday human existence, and attending closely to the linguist “nonsense” that arises in our attempts to describe or attest to various quests for meaning. “Is it not the task of the novelist,” she asks, “to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display” (“Modern Fiction” 160–1)?

The complex anomalous moments Woolf would have us bear in mind in our efforts to speak to “what life is really like” are precisely what is at stake, with a vengeance, in Diamond’s exploration of the difficulty of reality. In casting her eye on the role of these moments of incomprehensibility in everyday life, and the way they resist fitting into established conceptual narratives, Diamond, too, attends to the “little deviations which the human spirit seems to make” when “life escapes,” as it were. In Diamond’s treatment of the difficulty of reality, we find a philosophical response to Woolf’s rhetorical question about the task of the novelist. For in Diamond’s view, it is most certainly the task of the philosopher to convey life’s varying, unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display. For striving to do just this is the only way to remain true to the realistic spirit she ascribes to Wittgenstein.

In a recent discussion of Diamond’s work on literature, riddles and the range of linguistic phenomena associated with expressions of ethical experience and religious belief, Stephen Mulhall examines the ways in which Diamond’s writing bears the mark of her inheritance from Wittgenstein in its commitment to representing the realistic spirit of life as accurately as possible—even when it resists established Wittgensteinian conventions of perspicuous representation (“Realism, Modernism and the Realistic Spirit”). Diamond’s own way of flouting convention, Mulhall claims, is consistent with the modernist novel’s commitment to “questioning the generic conventions it inherits in the

name of a more faithful representation of the real" (8).<sup>17</sup> In an effort to remain true to Wittgenstein's realistic spirit, Diamond shows herself willing to sacrifice the signature concepts with which Wittgenstein's work is so often identified—"language games," "grammar," "forms of life," etc. As Mulhall points out, Wittgenstein forged these representational devices in the service of redirecting our attention to the ways in which we actually use words in our lives, to return us to our actual life with language. Conceived by Wittgenstein as tools to be used the work of clarification, such concepts should possess the inherent flexibility needed to accommodate any pattern of word use that a person might employ. But if we allow these concepts to become hardened, they may in the end only narrow our sense of what the ordinary might be, and thereby risk betraying Wittgenstein's most fundamental legacy.<sup>18</sup> Of Diamond's treatment of the difficulty of reality, Mulhall writes:

Diamond can properly acknowledge such difficulties only by...sacrificing one of the supposedly defining features of a distinctively Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy. For its business of returning words from their metaphysical to their everyday use (PI, 116) is usually glossed as a matter of rehousing words in the Heimat of ordinary language games. But properly to register the essential nature of a difficulty of reality asks us to acknowledge the capacity of reality to shoulder us out from our familiar language-games, to resist the distinctively human capacity to word the world, and thereby to leave us as bewildered and disorientated as a bird that suddenly finds itself incapable of constructing a nest, or a beaver of building a dam. (19)

What Diamond would have us see is that riddle phrases, nonsense phrases (forms of speaking that either lack meaning, exceed it, or defy our ordinary assignments of sense), as well as the failure of words

<sup>17</sup>In this essay, Mulhall discusses three papers by Diamond: "Riddles and Anselm's Riddle," "Wittgenstein on Religious Belief: The Gulfs Between Us," and "The Difficulty of Philosophy and the Difficulty of Reality." Each focuses on distinctly ethico-religious concerns.

<sup>18</sup>As Mulhall writes:...if—like any other representational conventions—this set of signature concepts is sufficiently substantial or robust to acquire a life of its own, then they might on occasions stand between us and an ability simply to acknowledge how things really are; rather than helping to subvert our tendency towards the imposition of a philosophical "must," they may actually subserve its further expression. And when a Wittgensteinian philosopher becomes so committed to the use of these signature concepts that he cannot conceive of another way of perspicuously representing the phenomena of our life with language when responding to a philosophical problem, then he has in effect imposed a set of philosophical preconditions on the reality he putatively aspires simply to describe. He has donned a set of Wittgensteinian conceptual spectacles; and by employing those concepts as lenses through which he views everything, he actively subverts the realistic spirit in which their creator forged and (at least attempted to) deploy them ("Realism, Modernism and the Realistic Spirit" 10–11).

in the face of momentous experience in which reality surpasses our sense-making capacities, all nonetheless play a key role in the rich life with language that Wittgenstein seeks to display to us with clarity, even if they cannot be accounted for through his signature concepts. Such expressions are techniques of our language as any other. They are empty of linguistic sense, to be sure, but not of human use and significance.

In her examination of these phenomena, Diamond draws upon the insights she delivers in “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” *The Realistic Spirit* and elsewhere about Wittgenstein’s view of nonsense, and our need—as good readers and moral agents—to pat attention to what Woolf calls “little devintions which the human spirit seems to make from time to time” by entering imaginatively into taking nonsense for sense in order to diagnose the confusion or understand the ethical impulse that lies at the source of that nonsense in the heart of its speaker. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seeks to disabuse us of our tendency to succumb to metaphysical nonsense. In the “Lecture on Ethics,” however, he gives us new insights into the role of nonsense in his thinking: Nonsensicality, he says there, is the “very essence” of sentences with which we give voice to our ethical experience. Expressions of ethical experience or religious belief represent cases in which our linguistic intentions are such that what we want to say is essentially incompatible with making sense. As Diamond writes “sometimes the purposes with which we speak would not be served by sentences that makes sense” (“EIMT” 164). Any attempt to render an ethical sentence meaningful, Wittgenstein declares, he would reject, *ab initio*, “on the ground of its significance” (LE 44). Nonsense that “springs from a desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life,” he continues, is a “document of a tendency of the human mind” which he “cannot help respecting deeply” (LE 46). Diamond pays her own respects to the complex function of nonsense in our ethical lives through her attention to the riddles and difficulty so significant to the spirit of everyday reality.

In her essay on the difficulty of reality, Diamond draws upon Cavell’s reflections in “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*” on the philosophical difficulty of seeing the obvious. She writes: “it is within the everyday that there lie the forms and varieties of repudiation of our language-games and distance from them, the possibility of being tormented by the hiddenness, the separateness, the otherness of others” (“Difficulty” 77). An integral part of what makes the experience of such difficulty so traumatizing or

astounding is this: what the shouldered-out person sees as incomprehensible—awesome or astonishing in its beauty or grace or agonizing in its horror—is seen by others as utterly banal. As Mulhall puts it, “Difficulties of reality thereby serve to isolate individuals, disclosing others as opaque to them and themselves as opaque to others; Reality’s resistance to our understanding reveals us as essentially resistant to one another’s understanding” (29).

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf grapples with a reality marked by such difficulty. She first creates a community of characters who are all, to different degrees, isolated from each other, laboring in the “extreme obscurity of human relationships” and striving both to guard their privacy and to make contact with the other, to gain access to what Lily Briscoe describes as the “dome-shaped hive” of their inner lives, to read the “tablets bearing their sacred inscriptions” (175; 43; 54). “All of them bending themselves to listen,” Woolf writes, thinking, “Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed” (96).

In her essay, as I said, Diamond explores a range of phenomena to describe the difficulty of reality. Although her first examples deal with the traumas of life, death and the horror of what we do to animals, she also includes in her account “instances of goodness or beauty [that] can throw us” (“Difficulty” 60). One of the things Woolf offers at the center of her elegiac novel is a sense of general astonishment and awe at the existence of beauty—represented most fully in the figure of Mrs. Ramsay (whom Prue pronounces “the thing in itself” and Mr. Banks “the happier Helen of our days,” the sight of whom, “reading a fairy tale to her boy had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution to a scientific problem”)—and a yearning not only somehow to grasp its mystery and grace, but to come to terms with the depth of its loss (118, 51). By offering us the reflections of the characters for whom the range of phenomena associated with the difficulty of reality is a pressing issue, Woolf also shows us that the reality of the Ramsay’s thriving world in “The Window” is one whose integrity war and death and the passage of time are always poised radically to alter if not obliterate.

In a precursor to the enigmatic narrative of “Time Passes,” the Ramsays’ daughter, Nancy (who shares her mother’s sense of the contingency of life as well as a Wittgensteinian affinity for the sense of cosmic magic and Godlike power the Grimm tale explores), stands alone over a tidal pool, intermittently casting “vast clouds over [the] tiny world by holding her hand against the sun” and bringing “darkness and desolation, like God himself, to millions of ignorant and

innocent creatures,” before taking her hand away to let the sun stream down again.<sup>19</sup> For Nancy,

...the two senses of that vastness and this tininess...flowering within it made her feel that she was bound hand and foot and unable to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness (78).

If Diamond’s “difficulty of reality” finds a central locus in *To the Lighthouse*, its punctum is surely to be found in the abrupt, bracketed reports of the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew and Prue in “Time Passes.” That these death notices stand in apparent contrast with the content of that section’s final bracketed statement—which delivers news of Mr. Carmichael’s successful volume of poems (“the war, it seems, had revived people’s interest in poetry”) is a question I will return to in the conclusion (138).

The sudden incursion of these asides into the “eyeless” quizzical narrative of a world falling into and being “fetched up” from oblivion underscores Nancy’s apprehension of the insignificance of individual human lives when seen against the vastness of the universe (even those who have been, but moments ago, absolutely alive and absolutely significant to the fictive community for which they were central, and to the reader, engaged imaginatively in that community) (143). The shocking impact of these understated reports of parenthetical death thus also gives readers a sense of the “contradictory permanent horrors,” of the difficulty of reality, and works to shoulder them out from their experience of the world of the novel (thus far).

Describing the difficulty of reality, Diamond turns to literary examples which depict the bewildering phenomenon as an anomalous disturbance, a shocking experience of horror, grace or beauty, that is anchored in a concrete, particular event or object (a photograph, a dead baby, a seemingly miraculous act of sacrifice, the architecture of a tree). In *To the Lighthouse*, however, the difficulty of reality is more or less untethered from any acute particular event in the story, and haunts the novel in a pervasive, general way. It is present in the onslaught of darkness and undoing of “Time Passes” and the musings and enigmatic questions that pervade it. It is present in Mr. Ramsay’s melodramatic “phrase-making” about the “poor little world,” and in the refrains from Tennyson and Cowper he is overheard to recite in

<sup>19</sup>For discussions of Wittgenstein’s fondness for Grimms’ fairy tales, see Fania Pascal’s memoir in Rhees 33–4. See also Diamond’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s ethics in relation to Grimm’s “The Fisherman’s Wife” and of “Rumpelstiltskin” in her “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.”



his moments of broken privacy (and which Woolf echoes pointedly in "Time Passes") (*TLP* 72; Cowper 48). Mr. Ramsay's thoughts of search parties and shipwrecks attest not only to his need for a script through which to express his own distinguishing tyrannical need for sympathy but also to his deep acquaintance with Cowper's "obscurest night" in which, all "transient respite past" and "toil subdued," we perish, each alone. The difficulty of reality is present in Mr. Ramsay's recognition of "all sorts of horrors" that "seemed not to depress him" but which cause his wife to remark with a stark, uncustomary violence that "if she had said half what he said, she would have blown her brains out by now" (72-3).

Indeed, the difficulty of reality makes itself known from the novel's very beginning. The "horrible permanent contradictions" within it take root in the tension between the 'yes...but' of its opening lines. The sense of possibility Mrs. Ramsay puts forth in her comforting response to her youngest child's implicit question (can we go to the lighthouse?): "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow" is quickly staunched by her husband's denial of the antecedent of his wife's *modus ponens*, her "way that affirms by affirming": "but it won't be fine" (8). Mr. Ramsay damns his wife for hiding from their children that "life is difficult," by saying things that "flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies" (35). Mrs. Ramsay, as we have seen, is herself deeply aware of "that lie"—that we are all in the hands of the Lord, as well as the lie implicit in her generously hopeful phrases and repeated promise to James. For the sense of possibility that she presents to her son and represents for her whole entourage is one she proffers in order to shield them from the darker and more threatening sense of possibility she herself intuits: that it won't be at all fine tomorrow, that the uncertain future is perhaps but an abyss.

Mrs. Ramsay's sense of possibility is always infused with an uncanny prescience of the passage of time as leading to potential annihilation, a ringing down of unimaginable death or oblivion on a world of people so visibly present and alive. Her difficulty of reality has to do with the strange sense that all that is alive and flourishing before her "has now come to an end," is already over and done with, that "the lights of the town and of the harbour and of the boats seemed like a phantom net floating there to mark something which had sunk" (85, 71). Already. Her attunement to the "darkness, spreading and unfathomably deep" of a general difficulty of reality that few others around her see or understand, is marked by an awareness of what Simone

Weil calls “affliction” (“unhappiness”—*malheur*) (65). Diamond calls our attention in her essay to Weil’s notion that:

Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: ‘I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort. To be aware of this in the depth of one’s soul is to experience non-being. (70; qtd. in “Difficulty” 74–5)

In Simone Weil, Diamond finds an example of a philosopher who saw the difficulty of her philosophical work as the difficulty of *keeping* to the awareness of affliction and of the difficulty of reality, of not being “deflected” from it, in Cavell’s sense, by turning to established related philosophical or moral debates and arguments apparently in the vicinity as a way of resolving the problem at hand.<sup>20</sup> One of Diamond’s primary aims in her essay is to examine the ways in which certain works of literature can remain similarly engaged in a mode of understanding difficulties of reality that may be present “only in a diminished and distorted way in philosophical argumentation” that gives in to a tendency to turn a difficulty of the human condition so painful that it unseats reason into a factual, intellectual problem (“Difficulty” 69). Professional philosophy, Diamond points out, certainly knows how to deal with hard problems. But the hardness of a difficulty of reality is of a different order of difficulty from the hardness of a philosophical argument (“Difficulty” 58).

It is the non-being Weil speaks of that Mrs. Ramsay experiences as she vacillates between a sense of coherence and plenitude (“It is enough! It is enough!”) on the one hand and doom as a wedge-shaped core of darkness on the other in her solitary reverie, and which Nancy experiences as a sense of nothingness at the tidal pool (68). It is this non-being that encroaches on Woolf’s narrative in the bracketed reports of “Time Passes.” That Mr. Carmichael’s creation of a volume of poetry, with its power to fill a need for the post-war audience should also be reported in these same brackets, however, provokes important questions about Woolf’s own sense of the power of literature in a post-war context—her literature in its context—to offer a creative, productive salve to combat the difficulty and affliction

<sup>20</sup>See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging” 238–66, and “Declining Decline” 29–76.

she takes up in her novel (and this includes the skeptical problem of her surviving characters' opacity to each other). I want to probe, by way of conclusion, this question, which seems especially pressing when considered alongside Diamond's own questions about whether (and how) certain works of literature can be more adept in their treatment of the philosophical complexities of our ethical experience of the world than certain applied philosophical approaches and theories can be.

A few weeks after *Mrs. Dalloway* appeared in 1925, Woolf wrote down her now-famous speculation about a new name for her future work, a generic designation to supplant 'novel': "A new\_\_\_ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (Diary III, 33). Christine Froula has argued that in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf adapts the tradition of pastoral elegy to a more modern public elegy, transposing to prose fiction the elegiac form of post-war mourning and moving on to (Milton's) fresh woods and pastures new (126). I want to end here by reflecting on the ways in which *To the Lighthouse* is a work in which a search for lost time *does* become a therapeutic means of reanimating the novel's present (and Woolf's own). But attending to Woolf's elegiac project as one that entails struggles with difficulties of reality, in Diamond's sense, helps us to see that if the novel resolves with a productive sense of creative possibility, it is not quite because it aims to *console*. Rather, Woolf plumbs the depths of life's most painful and confounding difficulty and contingency, and only then offers "some incorrigible hope" "twined about her dirge" (135). There are no fresh woods and pastures new for the Ramsays or even for Lily Briscoe. Only the same "poor little place," now "much changed" (72; 152).

What Woolf offers us in the place of a neat resolution to her surviving characters' attempts to emerge from their mutual isolation and affliction—through continued questions and quests for vision and unity—is a sort of frayed fairy-tale ending: Woolf sets the scene of separateness by endowing it with a magical simultaneity and parallel perspective (James, Cam and Mr. Ramsay in the boat, making their long-postponed trip to the lighthouse, and Lily with her painting on the lawn). It is not an enchanted flounder in Woolf's story, as it is in the Grimms', but a mutilated mackerel that is thrown back into the sea, and by and by the standstill in which all parties are stuck (the boat in the Mariner's windless harbor and Lily puzzling before the "hideously difficult white space" of an empty canvas) is magically broken, as if to make way for a transformative forward movement toward the final culmination of their respective projects, and with it the evolution of the characters themselves toward an improved mutual understanding

they only reach through their shared individual experience of the difficulty of reality.

But does Woolf solve the skeptical problem so central to her novel by establishing unity among her characters? Not quite. Mr. Ramsay, for example, remains mysterious, private, unknown as he makes his leap onto the lighthouse rock as if proclaiming: “there is no God.” From his youngest children’s point of view, “...he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking I have reached it, I have found it; but he said nothing” (210). Does Woolf “get at the truth of things” through Lily’s culminating vision? Not exactly. Lily’s revelation endures for but a fleeting epiphanic moment. It represents an “attempt at something that must be perpetually revisited and remade.” It has, after all, taken four separate moments of revelation and composition over a period of more than a decade for Lily to “smooth out something she had been given...years ago, folded up; something she had seen” and represent it “[w]ith a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second” in the line at the center of her completed painting (211). Her vision, in spite of its position in the novel, signaling finality and apparent plenitude, is still a revision. Her search, the narrative suggests, will continue even in its wake.

What Woolf *does* do by the end of the novel is to show us that while the experience of the difficulty of reality may isolate us from others, in certain cases, or to certain degrees, it can also work to bring people together. Woolf leaves us with the “incorrigible hope” of a continued (and shared) engagement with questions and quests for transformations that are always incomplete and visions that are always revisions, all of which go sounding on, long after the novel has ended. And it is with these questions and quests, Woolf seems to say, that separately and yet somehow together, “we remain” (133).

*Tulane University*

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