Faith and Fabrication in *To the Lighthouse*: Virginia Woolf's Table-Cloth(s)

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The article below is a 'working paper':

Critics often identify the Ramsays' kitchen table from To the Lighthouse *(1927) as the principal object of philosophical enquiry in Virginia Woolf's work, but their accounts have never taken the Ramsays' table-cloth into careful consideration. With a specific focus on* To the Lighthouse*, this essay traces Woolf's repeated references to tables and table-cloths, both coupled and uncoupled. It explores the ways in which Woolf used the table-cloth to engage in early twentieth-century debates regarding the nature of reality, perception, and representation. It considers the novel's philosophical position—its awareness of dramatic shifts in the epistemology of science, its references to the philosophy of mathematics, and its faithful commitment to a fabricated reality. Ultimately, the Ramsays' table-cloth is an essential part of Woolf's project to "reach what [she] might call a philosophy" that was built primarily on her own terms and no one else's.*

Keywords: Virginia Woolf / *To the Lighthouse* / faith / philosophy / perception

The Ramsays' kitchen table from *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a popular point of departure for almost every discussion of Virginia Woolf and philosophy. The iconicity of the Ramsays' table dates back to the late 1960's and early 1970's, when some of Woolf's earliest critics (including S.P. Rosenbaum, John Graham, and A.G. Hoffman) noted how it functions as "the ideal form of the philosopher" (Hoffman 697). But it wasn't until 2000, when Ann Banfield audaciously linked the Ramsays' table with the "new philosophical Realism" of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore in her influential monograph *The Phantom Table*, that the Ramsays' table became one of the most controversial subjects of debate in the history of Woolf studies (4). Over the past twenty years or so, the likes of Gillian Beer, Michael H. Whitworth, Timothy Mackin, and Derek Ryan have questioned whether or not the Ramsays' table was really so heavily influenced by Russell and Moore.[1] Since then, a number of iconic tables belonging to other philosophers—like David Hume, Leslie Stephen (Woolf's father), Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Arthur Eddington—have emerged as likely sources of inspiration for Woolf.[2]

Despite the recent influx of research regarding Woolf's engagement with other philosophers' tables, the Ramsays' table-*cloth* has scarcely been mentioned—let alone discussed. With the exception of Estella Ciobanu's passing comment that the "*tablecloth* [is] metaphoric for [Lily's] *canvas,"* the Ramsays' table-cloth has only ever been cited incidentally (59). But if we are ever going to fully understand how "subject, object, and the nature of reality" operate in Woolf's work, we can no longer afford to dismiss the table-cloth as a coincidental element of the Ramsays' domestic sphere (*Lighthouse* 22). The table-cloth, like the table, had profound philosophical significance for Woolf. Not only is it a key feature of *To the Lighthouse*—it also makes deliberate appearances in *The Voyage Out* (1915), *The Waves* (1931), and *The Years* (1937). Woolf modifies the symbolic significance of the table-cloth throughout these novels, but its function generally stays the same: to reveal the fabricated quality of perceptual reality. And nowhere in Woolf's work does this revelatory attribute operate as energetically as it does in *To the Lighthouse*, a novel that is deeply concerned with tracing the relationship between the shifting threads of daily life and the seemingly stable structures that are said to exist beneath the perceived world. With a specific emphasis on *To the Lighthouse*, I demonstrate in turn how Mr. Ramsay's philosophical convictions, William Bankes' scientific theories, and Lily Briscoe's artistic compositions each function as fabricated table-cloths: forms are related—but not equivalent—to the Russellian kind of "real table" that supposedly "persists independently" of perception (27). The Ramsays' table-cloth, I propose, is an essential part of Woolf's project to "reach what [she] might call a philosophy" that was built primarily on her own terms and no one else's (*Moments* 85).

The Admirable Fabric of the Masculine Intelligence

In *To the Lighthouse*, it is not Mrs. Ramsay but her husband Mr. Ramsay who scrubs the table clean—at least figuratively speaking. Hoping to discover "the nature of reality," Mr. Ramsay strips his kitchen table of *anything* (including a table-cloth) that might "distract" or "delude" his observation of it (22). This is a laborious feat indeed—he invests "years of muscular integrity" scraping, scrubbing, and reducing the

table into ‘something bare, hard, [and] not ornamental” (129). After spending “night after night” thinking “about the reality of kitchen tables,” Mr. Ramsay’s face even partakes of the table’s qualities: “worn,” “ascetic,” and “unornamented” (128-9). At dinner, his vision becomes so committed to seeing the table’s “angular essences” that he eventually sees nothing but “cubes and square roots” (86). Mr. Ramsay has complete faith in the material reality of his cubes and square roots.[3] His wife, on the other hand, doesn’t seem quite as confident:

> A square root? What was that? Her sons knew. She leant on them; on cubes and square roots … she let it uphold and sustain her, this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence, which ran up and down, crossed this way and that, like iron girders spanning the swaying fabric, upholding the world, so that she could trust herself to it utterly, even shut her eyes, or flicker them for a moment … Then she woke up. It was still being fabricated. (86)

Hugh Kenner, one of the few critics to give attention to this passage, accused Woolf of “dismiss[ing]” mathematical discourse as a superficial “thing” that “men talk their feelingless talk about” (181). But the problem with Kenner’s brutal critique of *To the Lighthouse* is that Woolf was not necessarily concerned with dismissing the *value* of mathematics so much as challenging the epistemic *scope* of its authority.[4] Mrs. Ramsay’s inability to understand basic Euclidean geometry is not “a radical defect of [Woolf’s] imagination” as Kenner contends (181-2). Instead, it is a triumph of Woolf’s imaginative capacity to raise important philosophical questions such as: Do mathematical equations bear any resemblance to the table that Mrs. Ramsay “lean[s] on”? Or are they merely the “admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence”? The answer to these questions lies in the margins of Woolf’s manuscript for *To the Lighthouse*, where she poetically scribbled three words next to this passage: “equalling / something / else” (*Original Holograph Draft* 173). Mrs. Ramsay knows, as Woolf clearly knew, that cubes and square roots do not “equal” a real table. Instead, Mr. Ramsay has fabricated “something else”: a table-cloth.

Mr. Ramsay believes that his table-cloth is a "scrubbed kitchen table" (22) devoid of "distractions" and "delusions" (129). But the true delusion lies in his faithful commitment to a realist world like G.E. Moore's—a world where "the existence of a table in space" does not depend upon the awareness of an observer (29-30). The problem with Mr. Ramsay's realist philosophy is that you cannot, as Bernard notes in *The Waves,* "describe the world seen without a self" (171). In other words, you cannot stand outside of the world you strive to understand. We always bring our conscious perceptions "to the table," so to speak. In the same way that a table-cloth precludes us from directly seeing the table beneath it, perception mediates between our senses and the "material things"—to borrow a phrase from Moore—of the "real" world (223).[5] And our perceptions are never objective because they are, as the philosopher of science Karl Popper wrote in 1972, "always preceded by a particular interest, a question, or a problem" (342). Whenever we observe an object (like a table), we actively cast our own personal (table-)cloth over that object.[6] Consequently, perceptual reality becomes clothed by numerous cloths—each of them toned by the particular interests, questions, and problems of the observer. It should come as no surprise then that Mr. Ramsay's table-cloth is "something bare, hard, [and] not ornamental"—it bears the invisible perceptual stains of his deluded commitment to a colorless reality (129).

Mr. Ramsay, who sees with an "intensity of mind," is an archetypal example of what Arthur Eddington described as "the scientist [who] looks at [a plank of wood] through a magnifying glass" in order to "get nearer to the truth of things" ("Domain" 191). According to Eddington, the problem with fixating on the microscopic scale of the wooden plank is that "under magnification the plank dissolves into atoms" so that "the original plank is lost" ("Domain" 191).[7] For all of Mr. Ramsay's obsessive fixation on the table —all of his years spent scrubbing—he is never able to "find" the "reality of kitchen tables" (128-9). The only table that he has managed to fabricate is a "phantom kitchen table" because his cubes and square roots bear absolutely no resemblance to the table the family gathers around for dinner every evening.[8] No wonder then that Mrs. Ramsay seems hesitant to shut her eyes in the passage quoted above, opting instead to "flicker them for a moment" as she tests to see if Mr. Ramsay's "iron girders" can actually "uphold and sustain her" as they claim to do.[9] Mrs. Ramsay's lack of faith in her husband is a typical manifestation of

Woolf's distaste for the insensitive philosophy of men who dismiss the seemingly insignificant aspects of everyday life (like chit-chat at the dinner table) as "silly, superficial, [and] flimsy" (70).[10] For Woolf, the essential threads in the fabric of reality are "lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver" (22). Any philosophy that "reduc[es]" this fabric down to a "white deal four-legged table" will bear absolutely no trace of reality.

By placing every ounce of his faith in the "reality of kitchen tables," Mr. Ramsay has failed to consider the complementary reality—the colorful, organic, fabricated, shifting, and stained reality—of table-cloths (128). In this sense, the table and the table-cloth are typical examples of Woolf's thoroughly-noted tendency to assimilate binary oppositions such as "granite and rainbow" ("The New Biography" 478), "clay and diamonds" (*Orlando* 46), and gravel and butterflies (*Waves* 6). Notably, Woolf introduced her most iconic pair of binaries (granite and rainbow) in the same year that she published *To the Lighthouse* (1927).[11] It should come as no surprise, then, that Woolf's figuration of granite and rainbow shares a number of similarities with her figuration of table and table-cloth. Most dramatic is the way in which both pairs of binaries relate to the "haunt[ing]" question that Woolf posed in her diary in January 1929: "is life very solid or very shifting?" (218). As Derek Ryan notes, Woolf's figuration of granite and rainbow has repeatedly been understood as a "fixed and stable metaphor" denoting a strict opposition between "solidity and intangibility, truth and fiction" (*Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* 28-31). Such "contradictions"—to borrow a word from Woolf's diary—have continued to haunt Woolf scholarship just as much as they haunted Woolf herself.[12] But given that "nothing [is] simply one thing" (*Lighthouse* 152), perhaps Woolf's binary oppositions needn't be perceived as static contradictions. Perhaps both the "very solid" table *and* the "very shifting" table-cloth are intrinsic to our understanding of "life" in Woolf's fiction. Mitchell A. Leaska explained it like this: "For [Woolf], the harmonious existence of opposites in relation to one another was the nature of reality; reality existed not in 'either … or' but in 'both'" (147). On one hand, we crave solidity, just as Woolf craved a "solid table on which to put [her work]" (*Diary* 264), or as Lily felt the need "to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table" (164). But what Mr. Ramsay's "uncompromisingly plain" table teaches us is that without a

table-cloth, the bare table can never fulfil our concomitant need to "feel" that the table is also "a miracle … an ecstasy" (164). Like table-cloths, miracles and ecstasies come and go at irregular intervals—they fluctuate in accordance with the unpredictable circumstances of life. And "life [is] most vivid," as Lily notes, in "the unreality": the "glittering" and "startling" moments before "habits" (like Mr. Ramsay's cleaning habits) "sp[i]n themselves across the surface" like a piece of steel wool (157). An authentic attempt to understand reality would not erase the "startling" stains of life—it would proudly exhibit traces of those stains.

Unlike Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay abstains from cleaning her summer home (as a middle-class woman living in the early twentieth century, she would have had servants to do the literal work of scrubbing kitchen tables). Instead, she sits at "the head of the table," where she strives to weave the members of her family into a harmonious household fabric—one in which each guest is an essential thread (68). Whereas Mr. Ramsay has "narrow" eyes that "glare" away from the inner life of others, Mrs. Ramsay has eyes that are "so clear that they [seem] to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings" (86). She will do anything to delay the separation caused by "men and women [rising] over the rim of the table-cloth" immediately after dinner (89). Even when she feels inclined to separate "one thing from another" (87), this inclination only lasts "just for a moment" before she quickly turns to her impulse for a "community of feeling with other people" (92). We consistently find Mrs. Ramsay with needles in her hands, envisioning how she might weave the separate threads of characters like Lily Briscoe and William Bankes into one fabric. She honors her responsibility to dissolve "the walls of partition" so that the separate "chairs, tables, [and] maps" of her family can become "all one stream" (92). But she performs this duty without the support of her husband: "the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rest[s] on her" (69).

Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" (1939) reveals that she too found "great delight" in putting "severed parts together" (*Moments* 85). "This wholeness," wrote Woolf, "means that [daily life] has lost the power to hurt me" (*Moments* 85). But in *To the Lighthouse,* Mr. Ramsay, "lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one," threatens his family with that "power to hurt" every day (7). While we consistently find the women

of *To the Lighthouse* with tools of connection in their hands (such as needles, paint-brushes, and nets), we find the men holding weapons of separation—knives, axes, hammers, and scythes.[13] These weapons threaten Mrs. Ramsay's solitary efforts to synthesize the family into a coherent whole. Take, for example, her son James' deep-rooted impulse to "[take] a knife and [strike] his father to the heart" (150); or Andrew's sexist thoughts towards women like Nancy, who he is "rather sharp with" (63). All of these violent impulses are "inspired" by Mr. Ramsay, whose knife-like demeanor has "excited" "extremes of emotion … in his children's breasts" (7). Surprisingly, Mr. Ramsay knows that "if he put implicit faith in [Mrs. Ramsay], nothing should hurt him"—not even the knives of his own sons. But in order to be protected by his wife's "capacity to surround and protect" (34), he would have to surrender his arsenal of separation—his "sharp" tone, his "irritable" behavior, his impulse for "a little solitude" (57), and his incessant need "to assert himself" (71). He faithfully clings to this arsenal throughout the novel, oblivious to the fact that the "admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence" leaves him "exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt" (131).

The First Scientist of His Age

The Ramsays' home is so saturated with "the fatal sterility of the male" that their guest, the scientist Mr. Bankes, arrives carrying a "penknife" in his pocket (33). In a subtle display of the patriarchal "power to hurt," Bankes threatens to destroy the relations that Lily has so carefully weaved into her canvas by tapping it with "the bone handle" of his penknife (45). This subtle gesture is a clear indication that he favors the seemingly solid "solution of a scientific problem" over Lily's overtly fabricated artistic expression (41). But unlike the men that surround him, Bankes does not cling to his weapon (and the ideology it represents) for long. In a silent act of reverence for the "perfectly cooked" French dish that Mrs. Ramsay has prepared "in pity" for Bankes, he "lay[s] his knife down for a moment" (82). Weapon aside, Bankes' conversion to connection begins. As he eats "attentively," he begins to recognize the "great care" that has been arranged into the fabric of Mrs. Ramsay's dish (82). "It is a triumph," Bankes

proclaims after eating the "specially tender piece" of meat that she has carefully selected for him (82). Instead of perceiving Mrs. Ramsay as "trifling and boring" as he did at the beginning of dinner, Bankes now "love[s]" and "revere[s]" her as "a wonderful woman" (82). By directing Bankes' attention to the combination of "savory brown and yellow meats" with bay leaves and wine (82), Mrs. Ramsay has ultimately made him more aware of life's "rich" and "tender" relations.[14]

Bankes' conversion during dinner is only possible because of his attentive examination of the table-cloth in the moments before dinner began. "[S]preading the fingers of his left hand on the table-cloth" sparks a revelation—a "flashing birds-eye view of his work" in science (73). We might expect a revelatory birds-eye perspective of science to elicit a proclamation of pride—one which celebrates science as the ultimate antithesis to his "trifling and boring" conversation with Mrs. Ramsay. But what Bankes' "mechanic" examination of the table-cloth reveals instead is that his scientific methodology will never yield something as solid as the table that stands beneath the table-cloth. "What a waste of time it all was to be sure!" Bankes exclaims (73). His own work is just as evanescent as both the meal he is about to eat *and* the table-cloth he is about to eat it on. But Bankes is not the only scientist in 1927 who suspected that his work might be "a waste of time" because it does not create a substantial reality. In his 1927 Gifford Lectures, Eddington proclaimed that "physics will never succeed in exorcising" the tables which lie "visible to [our] eyes and tangible to [our] grasp" (*Nature* ix). Instead of representing the "commonplace table" that we eat dinner at every night, scientists like Bankes create a "scientific table" out of symbols—like cubes, square roots, and "electric charges"—that can only weakly "stand" for the actual structures of reality (*Nature* ix). The laws and equations of science are an illusion, a fabrication, a table-cloth—in short, anything *other* than a table.

Here we might be tempted to agree with Bankes' hasty proclamation that science is "a waste of time." But for both Woolf and Eddington, this is not the case. "The path of science must be pursued for its own sake," wrote Eddington, "irrespective of the views it may afford of a wider landscape" (*Nature* xii). There is no use theorizing what kind of "wider landscape"—what kind of table—the table-cloth covers because, as the perceptual psychologist Jan Koenderink wrote, "*your world is exactly the way you see it*" (5):

colorful, organic, and shifting (like a table-cloth). In other words, while the table-cloth obfuscates the actual table beneath, it still offers an authentic perspective of perceptual reality. Each table-cloth is "a revelation of some order … a token of some real thing behind appearances" because it bears the marks of a world that has been transmuted by the mind (*Moments* 85). And in this "transmuted world," wrote Eddington, "new significances arise which are scarcely to be traced in the world of symbols; so that it becomes a world of beauty and purpose" (*Nature* xi). Woolf's fiction exhibits a profound awareness of the "beauty and purpose" that is enfolded in the beholder's transmuted world. In *The Waves*, for example, the tables and chairs lie dormant in anticipation of Percival's arrival: "things quiver as if not yet in being [and] the blankness of the white table-cloth glares" (69). Only the arrival of the beholder (Percival in this case) can trigger the "extraordinary transformation" of the world into a place of "intensity" (69).

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily identifies the act of transmutation as "love":

> It was love, she thought … distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain. (41)

While the symbols of mathematics and the phrases of poetry cannot perfectly "clutch" the objects of the world, they can still "become part of the human gain" because they are born out of love.[15] And "love," Lily later realizes, "ha[s] a thousand shapes" (157). Every individual "distill[s]" and "filter[s]" the world differently according to their own point of view. If we were to unite all of these points of view—gather all table-cloths—into one large table-cloth, it would certainly "spread over the world." But the spreading distance of an individual table-cloth is limited:

> [T]he table-cloth and its yellow stain, far from being allowed to spread in wider and wider circles of understanding that may at last … embrace the entire world … must [instead] go through the antics of the individual. (Waves 133)

The table-cloth in this passage from *The Waves* is clearly an individual table-cloth—its "yellow stain" is unique to the speaker (Rhoda).[16] Given this personal quality, Rhoda's table-cloth is not "allowed" to "embrace the *entire* world" because it can only support the "antics" of one "individual." Rhoda's table-cloth, however, is not the only table-cloth with spatial limitations. The breadth of *every* table-cloth—even the table-cloths of philosophy, science, and art—is confined to clothe only the perceptual field of the individual that fabricated it because there is an infinite number of ways to perceive a world that is ceaselessly evolving in tandem with individual consciousness. In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Russell put it like this: "When ten people are sitting round a dinner-table … they are not seeing the same table-cloth … the sense-data are private to each separate person" (20).[17] Yet even as Russell acknowledged the existence of "private and particular sense-data," he was still able to "arrive at a permanent object underlying all the different people's sense-data" by reducing "variations" in perception to "the laws of perspective and reflection of light" (21). Woolf's fiction, by contrast, marks a celebration of the idea that a beholder can make "a thousand shapes" of one table—none of which can be reduced to the laws of physics.[18]

Whereas Victorian scientists like T.H. Huxley devoted their life's work to discovering a single "rational order which pervades the universe" (60), late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientists like Bankes took a more Woolfian approach to their work. That is, upon realizing that they could not accommodate the seemingly immutable laws of classical science to the flux of individual perceptual experience, the likes of Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, and Erwin Schrödinger replaced traditional epistemic standards (like explanation, universalization, and reduction) with new articles of faith (like description, approximation, and interpretation).[19] It is Bankes' faithful conversion to these articles—his willingness to "listen to [Lily] with his wise child's eyes" as she tells him why her painting "make[s] no attempt at likeness"—that makes him "the first scientist of his age" (144-5). Given Bankes' capacity to see the hidden resonances between his scientific work and Lily's artwork, we might count his mind among the "five or six minds" that were, according to Friedrich Nietzsche writing in *Beyond Good and*

Evil (1886), willing to admit that "physics too is only an interpretation and arrangement of the world ... and *not* an explanation of the world" (44). As these "five or six minds" worked to unveil the elaborate pattern of relations between the material objects of the world and particular perceptual experience, Nietzsche's sentiment became increasingly commonplace among modern scientists.[20] Indeed, we only need to look as far as 1900 to find philosophers of science like Henri Poincaré publicly declaring that "physicists are not decipherers of Nature's laws, but librarians and cataloguers of experience" (qtd. in Heilbron 54). Like Poincaré and other major *fin-de-siècle* scientists, Bankes begins to involve the "question" of "the relations of masses, of lights and shadows" in his new mode of "scientific examination" (45). It is a question that he has apparently never considered before, but it marks the encounter between artist and scientist as something "profoundly intimate" (46).

A Moment of Revelation

The "intimate" relationship between Bankes and Lily might have been inspired by Woolf's reading of Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* (1920).[21] In a chapter titled "Art and Science," Fry stressed that both art and science are capable of evoking a state in which "the mind is held in delighted equilibrium by the contemplation of the inevitable relations of all the parts in the whole" (53-4). To understand exactly what Fry means by "the whole," we might adopt Rainer Maria Rilke's definition of "an artistic whole" which "need not necessarily coincide with the complete thing" (39). Both Woolf and Fry, however, would have applied a slight modification to Rilke's definition of an artistic (or scientific, for that matter) whole as that which *can never* "coincide with the complete thing." But this limitation matches a liberty—the freedom to express the relation between perception and reality under a relaxed definition of the word "truth" as something that is not purely physical but is instead "depend[ent] on the relation of our ideas to reality" (Bradley 2). "Truth," as Eddington put it in 1925, "is a diamond of many facets, darting now one ray, now another, into our lives" ("Domain" 191). Bankes' conversion to this definition of truth enables him to see the intimate relations between the work of "Darwin" and "Titian"—that is, between his own work and

Lily's (60). But Lily has to undergo a conversion of her own before she can abandon her Ramsay-an effort to "clutch" the objects of the real world.

It is not difficult to trace the influence of Lily's "profound respect" for Mr. Ramsay's realism at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse.* Just as Mr. Ramsay wants to believe that scrubbing the table will reveal the nature of reality, Lily "wants to believe," as Thomas G. Matro notes, "that her painting will capture a particular 'picture,' a complete, ordered vision that 'she had seen clearly once'" (214). Her initial effort to "make of the moment something permanent" is motivated by the same realist idea that captivated Mr. Ramsay—that a single, stable reality exists independently of her perception of it (133). However, as the novel progresses, it becomes painfully evident to Lily that her paintings will never be able to reveal a stable essence of reality. "It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad!" she exclaims as her faith in "a framework of steel" dwindles to doubt (42).[22] And with that, her "profound respect" for Mr. Ramsay's "scrubbed kitchen table" yields to "doubts about that table … whether the table was a real table; whether it was worth the time [Mr. Ramsay] gave to it" (129). Soon after, Lily experiences "a moment of revelation" that is almost identical to the episode that prompted Bankes' conversion:

> She had been looking at the table-cloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle … and she had felt an enormous exultation. (144)

Lily's examination of the table-cloth here triggers her conversion to the supreme article of faith that governed Roger Fry's philosophy of art and science: the "immediate and sensational" "recognition of relations" (53). In order to solve the "puzzling" question of "how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left" (46), Lily must first carry out what Fry called the "balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line of the picture" in *Vision and Design* (21). Or, to put the task in Woolf's words, she must "move the tree to the middle."

By the end of the first section of *To the Lighthouse* ("The Window"), Lily has already figuratively executed this balance by "[taking] up the salt cellar and put[ting] it down again on a flower pattern in the

table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree" (70). But it takes ten years for Lily to actually commit to moving the tree to the middle of her canvas. In this ten-year interim, her aide-mémoire (the table-cloth) reminds her to move the tree five times. As Thomas G. Matro notes, however, Lily spends most of the novel "reluctan[t] to accept a kind of unity that arises from relations rather than from "oneness'" (214). She knows that this "kind of unity" would only survive for a short time before "it would be destroyed" (170). She cannot commit to that central "mark" until the end of the novel, when she notices that the Ramsays' table-cloth has been replaced. The physical absence of the table-cloth—metaphoric for the inevitable future destruction of Lily's canvas—does not diminish its visionary presence in her memory ten years later. She must have faith that her canvas—the "frail shape she was building on the table" (122)—is only "frail" in a physical sense. Throughout the novel, Lily cultivates a faithful capacity to see that the relations between "all those innumerable things"—like colors, lines, and shadows—can only exist in state of "frailty" (166). *To the Lighthouse* culminates in the trial of Lily's capacity to place faith in a frail world that will forever shift in accordance with the fluctuating powers of perception. In a moment of "sudden intensity" (170), Lily overcomes her trial of faith by drawing a line at the center of her canvas. The connection is made—her conversion is complete.

Behind the Cotton Wool

In the spirit of shifting perspectives, I want to conclude by briefly complicating my earlier, rather audacious declaration that "there is no use theorizing … what kind of table the table-cloth covers" with Woolf's alluring "idea" from "A Sketch of the Past":

> [I]t is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of that work of art. (Moments 85)

When Woolf peeks "behind the cotton wool" of the table-cloth, she does not find an "uncompromisingly plain" kitchen table. Instead, she finds a "work of art" comprised of innumerable "connected" "parts." In this sense, Woolf is both an archetype of the Nietzschean "artist [who] always cleaves with raptured eyes only to that which still remains veiled after the unveiling" (*Birth of Tragedy* 115) and an antitype of Arthur Schopenhauer, the nineteenth-century German philosopher who expected to find "the naked truth" (265) hidden behind the "veil wrapped around human consciousness" (446). Whereas lifting the veil of *māyā* ostensibly reveals "the essence of things" in Schopenhauer's interpretation of Vedantic philosophy (379), Woolf's "power of lifting the veil" instead "show[s] inanimate things in the mystery & beauty of their reality" (Bell 208). Ultimately, rather than mourning the persistent presence of veils, nets, and table-cloths as "insubstantial, intrinsically inessential semblance[s] comparable to an optical illusion" (Schopenhauer 446), Woolf's fiction celebrates the "myster[iously]" fabricated quality of perceptual reality.

The Ramsays' table-cloth offers an initial point of access to a specifically Woolfian philosophy—one which casts a cloth over every perceived object in order to realize the limitations and liberties of human perception, thereby assimilating multiple opposing ways of understanding perceptual reality. Contrary to what many critics believe, Woolf did not simply "borrow" or "use" images from other philosophers (like Russell, Moore, or Berkeley) to "alert" her readers to the philosophical convictions at work in her fiction.[23] Instead, she fabricated fresh images (like a table-cloth) to explore familiar questions regarding the nature of reality, perception, and representation. The Ramsays' table-cloth from *To the Lighthouse* is just one example of Woolf's underappreciated capacity to place faith in fabrication—in the "cotton wool" canvas of a world where "all one's perceptions, half way to truth, [are] tangled in a golden mesh" (43). There is much more research to be done on the multi-functionality of domestic objects in Woolf's writings, especially if we heed Pamela L. Caughie's warning that "we cannot count on any one element meaning the same thing from one text to another" (101).[24] As the fabricated elements of Woolf's philosophy emerge throughout her fiction, their innumerable meanings will begin to unravel into view.

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[1] For further reading on this debate, see Ryan ("Woolf and Contemporary Philosophy" 362-3) and Steinberg (161-3).

[2] See Mackin (113), Beer (118), and Whitworth (*Einstein's Wake* 160-2).

[3] Mr. Ramsay even reads the time on his watch as an irrational number: "the square root of one thousand two hundred and fifty-three [≈ 35.3977400409]"—a very unlikely number to appear on a watch indeed (86).

[4] See Whitworth (*Einstein's Wake* 168-9).

[5] In "Some Judgements of Perception," Moore includes a table-cloth in his list of "material things or physical objects" that can be directly identified, but not necessarily defined (*Philosophical Studies* 220-252).

[6] Our eyes work like the "panes of glass, which, far from giving an accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely" in *To the Lighthouse* (79).

[7] In *The Years*, Eleanor conveys a similar sentiment as she gazes upon the "smooth hard surface" of a cup: "Atoms? And what were atoms, and how do they stick together?" (134).

[8] Or, in Eddington's words: "[t]he plank is not what it appears to be … [it] is mostly emptiness" ("Domain" 189).

[9] The First Page Proofs for this passage of *To the Lighthouse* suggest that Woolf originally intended for Mrs. Ramsay to "believe in [Mr. Ramsay] implicitly" (164). Before sending the proofs to Harcourt Brace, however, Woolf ultimately chose to excise this clause from her novel—further confirming Mrs. Ramsay's lack of faith in the "admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence."

[10] See Lackey (87).

[11] The binary first appeared as "granite and rainbow" in 1927 in "The New Biography" (478) before Woolf inverted the two terms (to "rainbow and granite") one year later in *Orlando* (46).

[12] Ann Banfield, for example, interprets the granite and rainbow figuration as a "dualism [that] divides Woolf's external world, like Moore's and Russell's … between '[t]he world of existence … fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries' and '[t]he world of being … unchangeable, rigid, exact'" (148-9). For other examples of scholars who "[confine] Woolf's terms to an oppositional framework," see Ryan (*Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* 27).

[13] See Brown (43).

[14] Brown similarly notes that "[Mrs. Ramsay's] successful act of union is exemplified by Mr. Bankes's change of heart" (45).

[15] Even if the "processes of science are … mechanical," as Roger Fry notes, "the motives of science are emotional" (54).

[16] Rhoda is the only character in *The Waves* who sees the yellow stain—the others repeatedly describe the table-cloth as solid white.

[17] David Hume similarly wrote: "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass" (67-8). Woolf may have been exposed to this idea by her father, Leslie Stephen, who included this quote from Hume in his *History of English Thought* (46).

[18] Individual table-cloths are juxtaposed with "Whitaker's Table of Precedency" in "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), where the "masculine point of view" establishes a "rule for everything"—including the "rule" that table-cloths "should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them." According to these standards, table-cloths that deviated from this rule "were not real tablecloths" because they did not resemble "the carpets in the corridors of the royal palaces" (6-7).

[19] For a brief overview of scientific developments in the early twentieth century, see Heilbron.

[20] Woolf was certainly aware of this dramatic shift in the epistemology of science by the time she wrote *Between the Acts* (1941), where one of her characters makes the following remark: "It's odd that science, so they tell me, is making things (so to speak) more spiritual … the very latest notion, so I'm told is, nothing's solid…" (179).

[21] See Roberts.

[22] In the manuscript for *To the Lighthouse*, Lily remarked that "her picture of the hedge" was "a waste of time" because the "spots of green & rose" did not perfectly resemble her "walk round the garden" (*Original Holograph Draft* 87).

[23] Banfield, for example, wrote that the majority of Woolf's philosophical "illustrations [were] borrowed, like the table, from the philosopher's list of external objects" (121). More recently, Chris Townsend devoted an entire article to exploring "Woolf's use of specifically Berkeleian images" (21-22).

[24] Whitworth notes how Woolf's references to "forms of domestic imagery and display" in *Night and Day* deserve more critical attention than they have received, asking: "what does it signify that the Hilberys do not have a tablecloth on their table and the Denhams do? Why is there so much attention to the physical fabric of books, and what do the different bindings signify?" ("Woolf, Context, and Contradiction" 16).