

EMBODIED MODERNISM: THE FLESH OF THE WORLD IN
E.M. FORSTER, VIRGINIA WOOLF, AND W.H. AUDEN

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Modernism's fragmented literary style has been called "an art of cities." My project challenges such conventional understandings by exposing a strain within modernism that expresses an awareness of a broader phenomenological world. In the work of E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and W.H. Auden, non-human presences are often registered through a character or speaker's innate sensory perception of their surroundings—what I call embodied modernism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology theorizes the intercorporeality of humans and the environment in ways that help elucidate this aspect of their work. Merleau-Ponty uses the phrase "flesh of the world" to explain the body as an open circuit embedded within the stimuli of larger environmental impulses.

The uncertainty stirring within modernism's formal disruptions, the sensory impressions revealed by stream of consciousness techniques, as well as the robust fusion of

latent emotions and unspoken associations that result in a memorable image or symbol invite ecophenomenological readings. Chapter I, “Passage From Pastoral: E.M. Forster,” traces a developing phenomenological awareness that is only fully manifested through the formal innovation of Forster’s modernist novel, *A Passage to India*, where landscape intervenes to direct the action of the plot. My second chapter, “The Phenomenological Whole: Virginia Woolf,” analyzes how her use of personification provocatively disrupts anthropocentrism in “Kew Gardens” and *Flush*. Her conception of a more-than-human world also complicates elegiac readings of *To the Lighthouse* by positioning nature not as a sympathetic mirror for humans, nor an antagonistic foil, but rather as a presence that intertwines with human life and renews embodied creativity. “Brute Being: W.H. Auden” shows how Auden’s later poems create a lexicon of common cultural assumptions about human identity in a firmly ordered relation with the world but combat their own hermeneutics by slipping towards the opposite binary in any dialectic the poem presents, whether it be scientific order and organic chaos, nature and culture, or human observer and non-human subject. Analyzing the work of Forster, Woolf, and Auden from the embodied perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology both challenges conventional definitions of modernism and expands ecocritical theory.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The silence of the land went home to one's very heart—its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life. [. . .] The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of the primeval forest was before my eyes [. . .] All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?
Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*

But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether . . .
Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*

And the stage was empty. Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralyzed. Her power had left her. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed. 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death.' Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. [. . .] The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion.
Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*

This project attempts to answer a problem posed by the ending of one of the first modernist novels, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As I sat in an undergraduate lecture hall, filled with the creaks of hardwood chairs and intermittent coughs, I listened to my professor read Marlow's final, broken, faltering conversation with Kurtz's beloved

and wondered what it was that couldn't be said. What innate, unspoken, presences might palpitate underneath the horizon line of dash? What grows from those little black seeds of ellipses? Of course, it had to do with telling lies about national motives and hiding human brutality, but the presence of the Congo also inserted itself in the new, halting rhythms of their dialogue. Their hesitations recalled the astounding immensity of the "silence of the land," its "smells" and its "concealed life" becoming a vivified force—a "face of immensity" whose "mute" stillness is powerful enough to reduce human conversation to mere, ignorant "jabber." Marlow's new consciousness of nature's presence shakes him to the core, provoking a series of unanswered questions about human and non-human identity that ripple throughout modern literature. Marlow's experiences in the African wilderness transform his understanding of civilization, morality, and even his ability to use language. My project explores how E.M. Forster's, Virginia Woolf's, and W.H. Auden's modernist forms represent an embodied awareness of a larger non-human environment that has independent agency and something of its own to communicate in the spaces of modernism's uncertainty.

Conrad's trailing ellipses leading off into blank space, and the chasm between words created by long dashes, are hallmarks of an innovative style that breaks with past literary customs to express the crisis of modernity. Modernism's fragmented literary style has been called "an art of cities," defined by "urban climates, and the ideas and campaigns, the new philosophies and politics that ran through them" (Bradbury 96). I want to challenge such conventional understandings by exposing a strain within modernism that expresses an awareness of a broader phenomenological world. I claim a

more significant role for the non-human environment in modernism. My argument doesn't deny the influence of the metropolis, but it does suggest that the palpable sights and sounds of any sensory environment have just as great an impact on modern literature as the ideologies of urban intelligentsia. Even modernism's most famous encounters with metropolitan space—Mrs. Dalloway on her way to buy flowers, or Leopold Bloom fingering the lemon-scented soap in his pocket—are mediated by a new awareness of the surrounding environment. However, the aim of my project is to show how modernism's attentiveness to these sensory presences is often made manifest in settings outside the city and underneath the silences between characters' spoken dialogue.

Modernist uncertainty is provoked by questions of cosmopolitan movements, but it also stems from what Elizabeth Bishop might call "Questions of Travel." England's imperialism and World War I initiated encounters with foreign terrains and unfamiliar people, striking at the very heart of what it means to be in a relationship, often violent, with a larger world. The darkness Conrad finds in that heart foregrounds British imperialism's brutal treatment of fellow-humans. While my project is based on the fact that *all* humans are animals, it also recognizes that literature has frequently used images of bestiality as a way to derogate and ostracize people on the basis of race and ethnicity. Edward Said's account, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that British colonialists determined people native to other countries "deserved to be ruled" because "'they' were not like 'us'" (xi) traces an inherent prejudice of exclusion within British culture; these same assumptions underlie anxieties about human relations with nature and the non-human. This project will locate a common ground between postcolonialism and ecocriticism that

might further both fields of study in modern literature. The time is ripe to consider the environment as a kind of “other” that British culture attempted to contain when nature did not conduct itself as a benign entity in concert with Anglo-European hegemonic order. Yet, as Said points out, efforts to subjugate other lives can have the unintended effect of promoting productive resistance (xii). Similarly, Forster, Woolf, and Auden often use the animate environment to critique cultural assumptions about hierarchies, political power, and traditional forms of knowledge.

Through extensive examination of key works of these authors, I demonstrate that modernism registers an increased self-consciousness of modern humanity’s fraught kinship with the nonhuman world. The power and potential of non-human presences are often represented through characters’ innate sensory perception of their surroundings—what I call embodied modernism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology theorizes the intercorporeality of humans and the environment in ways that help illuminate this significant but neglected aspect of the work of Forster, Woolf, and Auden.

Virginia Woolf, a principal theorist of modernist literature as well as one of its greatest novelists, notes how the perceiving subject of modern fiction differs from Victorian protagonists specifically because it is physically embodied. Her literary precursors “seem deliberately to refuse to gratify those senses which are stimulated so briskly in the moderns; the senses of sight, of sound of touch—above all, the sense of the human being, his depth and the variety of his perceptions, his complexity, his confusion, his self, in short” (“How It Strikes A Contemporary”). Following Woolf’s

groundbreaking lead, this dissertation studies a modernist-self embedded in sensory stimuli. Experiments with modern interiority delve into perceived realities that are difficult to articulate, more felt than understood, and subject to change. As the framing narrator listening to Marlow's story on the deck of the *Nellie* struggles to explain, meaning is often "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (Conrad 9). The surrounding environment gains a new presence as modernism explores the boundaries of language and the possibilities of embodied perception.

The theories of Merleau-Ponty are especially useful for articulating the effect of these new forms on environmental representations. During the first half of the twentieth century, both literature and philosophy became deeply attentive to language, yet grappled with a new distance between the signifier and the signified which hinted at profundities language could not contain. Merleau-Ponty theorizes the presence of the "invisible" as a necessary and ever-present corollary to conscious thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the kind of knowledge we can intellectualize and put into words is the visible manifestation of all the other bodily impulses of flesh that are constantly in contact with a larger environmental context. In "Metaphysics and the Novel," Merleau-Ponty explains the similarities between philosophy and literature:

The tasks of literature and philosophy can no longer be separated. When one is concerned with giving voice to the experience of the world, one can no longer credit oneself with attaining a perfect transparency of expression, if the world is such that it cannot be expressed except in "stories" and, as it were, pointed at. (28)

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology resonates especially powerfully with the work of those modernists, like Forster, Woolf, and Auden, most interested in "giving voice to the

experience of the world.” Merleau-Ponty’s intellectual development took place during the so-called High Modernist period between the two world wars, and he wrote several of his texts, including *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1942) in the 1930s and early 1940s. His thinking was directly influenced by major works of modern literature and art, particularly the novels of Marcel Proust and the painting techniques of Cezanne.

Merleau-Ponty was writing his final book, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1961), in the late 1950s until he died in 1961, making him a contemporary of W.H. Auden.

Merleau-Ponty elucidates the intercorporeality of humans and environment by explaining it in terms of “the flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty *Visible* 144). This crucial concept defines the reflexive interchange between one’s own tactile experience and the reciprocal sensory reaction of surrounding forces and objects that form the basis of one’s ability to know oneself within the world. Merleau-Ponty describes his “theory of the flesh” as an open “circuit.” For this type of embodiment, the human body is not an enclosed system; instead it is a means to engage with the larger organic network of shared world: “my body as interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body standing in front of the upright things, in a circuit with the world, an *Einführung* [empathy] with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies (as having a perceptual ‘side’ as well) made comprehensible by this theory of the flesh” (*Nature* 209). Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology thus helps to explain how certain modernist representations of human subjectivity and non-human consciousness inaugurate a perception of the self as embedded within the stimuli of larger environmental impulses. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes an interrogative approach to the

non-human environment “which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it” (*Visible* 102). As a result, uncertainty becomes a precursor to curiosity and learning—as hesitations lead to listening and perceiving, not just bafflement. In the fictions of Forster and Woolf, the poems of Auden, and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, open-minded acceptance of unexpected forms of intelligence and meaning displaces human-centered approaches to knowledge based on classifications and hierarchies. Thus, a more complete understanding of one’s own being is interlaced with an ongoing process of sensory interaction—a larger realm of worldly flesh touching and transforming our boundaries of selfhood.

Testing boundaries has long been recognized as a defining attribute of modernism. To borrow Ezra Pound’s famous phrasing, poets “make it new” (*Make It New: Essays By Ezra Pound*) by “break[ing] the pentameter” (“Canto LXXXI” 518, l.53). Fiction writers prioritize what Forster terms “pattern and rhythm” (*Aspects of the Novel* 149) over linear plots and distort narrative objectivity with stream of consciousness narrative techniques, or what Woolf describes as “life not as a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged” but “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (“Modern Fiction” 2034). If Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was one of the first novels to make these breaches within modern language, its radically disjunctive form is bound up in astounding new conceptions of the self within nature and the nature within self. Marlow’s shattering recognition that the wild—operating both externally and internally in the novel—would not conform to British hierarchical structures of commerce or expected codes of honor initiated the first pauses and stutters of modernism. New scientific

discoveries, particularly in the field of physics, also prompted modernism's reorientation towards an environment composed of waves and particles. Environmental awareness presses against the limits of what the human language can express. Shifting perspectives, generic hybridity, and formal fragmentation, long recognized as signal techniques of modernism, also reveal how representations of subjective consciousness are shaped by embodied perceptions of the physical world. Sight, sound, touch, weather, and non-human voices often drive the plot and the characters' actions. The uncertainty stirring within modernism's formal disruptions, the sensory impressions revealed by stream of consciousness techniques, as well as the robust fusion of latent emotions and unspoken associations that result in a memorable image or symbol, invite ecophenomenological readings that expand our understanding of important modernist works.

Since its emergence in the 1980s, ecocriticism has usually been applied to texts that foreground environmental ethics and realist natural encounters—the nature writing of American Transcendentalists and contemporary, non-fiction wilderness adventures are pillars of the field. However, a growing number of “dissident” eco-critics are beginning to question such a narrow construction of their discipline; Helena Felder, for instance, uses ecophenomenology and new historicism to reevaluate the “green” potential of the apostrophe in Romantic literature (42-46), and admonishes earlier ecocriticism for its antagonistic relation to established theoretical disciplines. My project also strives to expand the boundaries of ecocriticism by drawing on historical contextualization and the philosophy of ecophenomenology to recover and reevaluate an embodied modernism. This approach offers an alternative to other ecocritical practices criticized by theorists

such as Dana Phillips for insufficient rigor due to anachronistic applications of science, overt political agendas, or superficial divisions between natural and urban landscapes. Lawrence Buell invitingly opens ecocriticism to a broader range of approaches and texts by alluding to an “environmental unconscious” that encodes environmental values in texts that aren’t overtly about the environment (44). My dissertation similarly assumes that evaluating the environmental aspects of a text need *not* rest on identifying a desire to get back to nature, even though some authors in the modern time period are certainly interested in preserving England’s rural countryside from the threat of urban expansion. Rather, as I demonstrate, the quality that makes the modernist writing of Forster, Woolf, and Auden “environmental” is its emphasis on embodied perception.

I am not attempting to present Forster, Woolf, and Auden as “nature writers.” Instead I examine how their representations of environmental forces and non-human characters inflect a wide array of recognized modernist themes, including interiority, instability, and concerns of empire. In the pages that follow, “modernism” is defined more by differences of degree in rhetorical experimentation and themes of disruption than by any strict chronological time period. John Marx has recently articulated a definition of modernism that parallels my own: “Although there is no end of discussion about exactly when modernity occurs or exactly what it entails, critics generally agree that one of its pivotal features is the emergence of systems and networks that reconfigured modes of communication and the lived experience of time and space” (2). My dissertation finds a strain of modernism in which writers question the role of human characters within a

larger environmental system or experiment with how non-human voices interrelate with human modes of communication.

For Forster, Woolf, and Auden, modernist literature opens up new possibilities for representing non-human lives and natural forces. To be sure, not all modernists code their recognition of an enigmatic environmental agency the same way. For Conrad, the atmosphere of the gathering dusk and the currents of the Thames are implicated in “the Horror” of Marlow’s realization. However, fear is not the only modernist response to the realization that humans are merely one of many bodies that comprise a larger worldly flesh. For the most part, the modernist texts my dissertation studies do not render the environment as a source of terror. In the works of Forster, Woolf, and Auden, encounters with unknown aspects of non-human life, while sometimes startling, are just as likely to stimulate curiosity, inspiration, or humility. Animate environments serve a wide variety of purposes within their work. Forster’s India is protean, gliding between positive and negative outcomes; its meaning is frequently misunderstood by both British and Muslim characters. Woolf’s non-human presences often contribute to greater understanding between people. When Lily Briscoe is overwhelmed by the blankness of her canvas and her desire to express herself to those who are absent, the impulses of the surrounding sea and hedge direct her strokes, participating in the creation art and meaning. For Auden, poetic ruptures and metaphoric confluences promote an interrogation of boundaries and formal categories that ostensibly differentiate human and non-human. The resulting slippages invite identification and empathy with other beings. Despite these differences in approach and technique, all three authors sustain a tension between representing nature

as a chaotic force scrambling access to meaning and depicting nature as a panacea of harmony where truth and meaning ultimately coalesce. While each may have a different place along the spectrum of those extremes, nature remains a complex entity within their work—the environment is approached with a respect for difference and a willingness to empathize with commonalities shared by all living creatures.

My dissertation is organized to show how embodied representations of the environment reinvigorate several traditional issues within modernist studies. Ecophenomenological awareness of a larger worldly flesh does not serve one consistent thematic purpose here. This dissertation identifies six main themes that characterize embodied modernism: it challenges assumptions about humanism, reinvents the pastoral, critiques empire, complicates scientific findings that rely on mind-body dualisms, redefines anthropomorphism, and problematizes the assumption that language constitutes a barrier between humans and other animal species. In order to clarify these different facets of embodied modernism, each chapter is divided into several sections. The beginning of each chapter provides pertinent biographical information and a general context for the current status of scholarship related to that writer. The chapters on Woolf and Forster include separate discussions of several works and then culminate in a sustained analysis of a major text, demonstrating that ecophenomenological readings reveal new insight into canonical modernist novels. The Auden chapter identifies several different ways language comes into contact with the flesh of the world. Forster, Woolf, and Auden make a productive combination because together they cover an arc of time that follows embodied modernism's emergence from traditional narrative structures, its

pervasive use in “High Modernism,” and its arguable transmutation into a more extreme post-modern style. This trajectory highlights the correlation between modernism’s formal techniques and an increasingly animate representation of environmental forces registered through embodied perception.

Chapter Two, “Passage From Pastoral: E.M. Forster,” traces over Forster’s work a developing phenomenological awareness that is only fully manifested through the formal innovation of his most obviously modernist novel, *A Passage to India*. The initial sections of the chapter evaluate Forster’s reliance, in his early short stories, on the pastoral symbolism of Theocritus and Virgil. While Forster uses natural imagery in these stories to replicate classical ideas of stewardship and conservation, his pastoral tropes also repeat troubling stereotypes of children, lower classes, or foreign peasants as somehow “closer” to nature. Although Forster privileges their brand of knowledge over the narrow-minded viewpoint of his upper-class narrators, the stories are still mired in these traditional stereotypes. The effect is to use rural people to represent nature itself. But in “The Machine Stops,” *Howards End* and *Maurice*, Forster begins to subvert pastoral traditions by creating a dissonant hybridity of genre between realism and pastoral fantasy. This strategy highlights the impossibility of satisfying solutions to class conflicts or homosexual romance. Forster’s social critique is revealed through his manipulation of the green retreat and conventional Victorian ideas about what constitutes “natural” sexuality. These works exhibit a more complicated treatment of rural virtue: appreciation for nature more readily crosses boundaries of class, and heeding the body’s instinctive drives is portrayed as a necessary step towards greater self-awareness. Yet, as

complex as Forster's environmental representations are in these stories, they still don't explicitly connect a character's individual body with the flesh of the world, or go much beyond depicting nature as an emblem or passive entity to be looked after. However, his pervasive use of modernist techniques in *A Passage to India*—such as eschewing traditional plot devices in favor of repeated images and themes, accenting a profusion of sensory stimuli, and offering indeterminacy in moments of expected resolution—results in a fundamentally different depiction of the environment as embodied and independent. I read the famous episode at the Marabar caves as the result of an encounter of stone, flesh, flame, and unseen presences. Despite a ruling from the colonial legal system, the novel doesn't end with any definitive statement on the climatic events in the cave. Instead, the novel's cohesion is achieved through recurring images that intermingle human and non-human characters in unexpected ways. Moreover, the environment is portrayed as foundational to the novel's surprising conclusion: "They said in their hundred voices, 'No not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.'" The non-human world intervenes to prevent easy reconciliation between British and Muslim characters, suggesting that greater understanding must encompass not just respect between races, but also deference to non-human interests.

My Third Chapter, "The Phenomenological Whole: Virginia Woolf," shows how embodied perception of the environment is central to every aspect of her work. An awareness of a larger phenomenological world is evident in Woolf's personal writing, her non-fiction essays, her literary criticism, and most (if not all) of her fiction. Her diary entries attest to nature's prominence in her articulation of self-identity and creative

renewal. Woolf's reviews of other authors anticipate ecocriticism because she focuses on authors' sensitivity to rendering nature and often judges the success of their writing upon whether they depict the environment as active and essential. Her own work affirms these values. Woolf's fiction relies on embodied realizations to articulate a loosely constructed, abstract "whole," both formally and thematically. Her use of the non-human environment allows her to conceive of a more-than-human community. In "Kew Gardens," *Flush*, and "Thunder at Wembley," Woolf describes non-human animals in ways that might be labeled as anthropomorphic, but her treatment underscores the possibility that other animals share capacities for human-like emotion and thought while still granting other animals motives and opinions that differ from humans. Non-human animals often appear as agents of social critique that correct human misapprehension, undermining usual hierarchical assumptions of human superiority. The Woolf chapter culminates in a reading of *To the Lighthouse* based on Mereau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*. The characters' thoughts are informed by embodied awareness. Nature in the "Time Passes" section in particular has generally been analyzed as an elegiac commentary on the apocalyptic crisis of World War One. I complicate such accounts by contending that Woolf's vision of human experience within a larger natural world depends on a dialectic that has despair and loss as one pole, but unity and hope as the other. Nature functions neither as a sympathetic mirror for humans, nor an antagonistic foil, but rather as an intertwined mesh that renews embodied creativity. These new forms permit voices that are less controlled, suggesting the possibility of a non-human sentience that cannot be neatly captured in the syntax of human language.

Forster and Woolf were both influential for the development of Auden's poetry, the focus of my final chapter. "Brute Being: W.H. Auden," concentrates on Auden's later poetry, largely neglected by both modernist and ecocritical scholars. I argue for the renewed importance of these poems, showing how dexterously they weave themes of human and animal kinship with startling formal maneuvers. Although Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology only plays a central role towards the end of the chapter, ecophenomenological concepts reverberate throughout my readings of Auden's later poems. Indeed, the success of poetry often depends on a reader's embodied perception of sensory and auditory clues. Latent or "invisible" association and emotion, created by our shared experience in the world, suffuses the symbolic word with meaning. While nature is the overt subject-matter of a number of Auden's later poems, the operations of characteristic poetic devices—alliteration, unclear antecedents, changes in rhyme scheme, and enjambment—are what stimulate the reader to a new awareness of the environment. Frequently in Auden's work, poetic speakers offer perspectives that are discredited by the argument inherent in the form of the poem itself. Such poems create a lexicon of common cultural assumptions about human identity in a firmly ordered relation with the world, but combat their own hermeneutics by slipping towards the opposite binary in any dialectic the poem presents, whether it be scientific order versus organic chaos, nature versus culture, or human observer versus non-human subject. By pointing out that humans strive to construct and control the environment, Auden accentuates the reader's awareness of how society divests nature of its own independent beauty or authority. His later poetry suggests there is a dark side to any force that claims

the power to construct the meaning of another's life, and that the literary devices of personification and metaphor are implicated in constructing those relationships. The chapter is divided into four sections that respectively treat Auden's use of scientific rhetoric and embodied knowledge in poems such as "A Child's Guide to Modern Physics" and "Ode to Terminus;" his depictions of embodied conversations with non-human animals in poems like "Talking to Dogs," "Natural Linguistics," and "A New Year Greeting;" his revision of nature-culture dualisms in the pastoral tropes of "Bucolics" and the domestic themes of "Thanksgiving for a Habitat;" and finally his depiction of language arising from the flesh of the world in "First Things First." Language has long been considered the irrefutable proof justifying human superiority over the rest of the animal kingdom. In contrast, Auden's later poetry insinuates that the non-human world might contain other languages of its own. Merleau-Ponty's lectures elucidate Auden's representation of language itself as another manifestation of the flesh of the world: "There is a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies" (*Nature* 212). In Auden's later poems, human language emerges as merely another form of the Logos found throughout nature.

Analyzing the work of Forster, Woolf, and Auden from the embodied perspective of Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology both challenges conventional definitions of modernism and expands ecocritical theory. As the early twentieth century had its horrors, the early twenty-first century has also been defined by crises, including global warming, depletion of natural resources, terrorism, corporate greed, and wars created by assumptions of dominance. By demonstrating how some modernist writing engages in a

more fully embodied interaction with the world, I also hope to suggest that the embodied modernism of Forster, Woolf, and Auden has implications for aiding our discussion of questions related to the interconnectedness of humans and the larger environment we all share. As Woolf's quotation from *Between the Acts* suggests, when our cultural and linguistic "illusions have failed," initiating a faltering pause, the presences within those silences—cows, rain, or even the verdant darkness—may have something to insert to "annihilate the gap; bridge the distance; fill the emptiness and continue the emotion." Moments of crisis and fragmentation may present the best opportunity for making us aware of new forms and alternative solutions.

CHAPTER II

PASSAGE FROM PASTORAL: E.M. FORSTER

Although Forster's environmental imagery is often mentioned, its centrality warrants more rigorous investigation. In Forster studies, short shrift has been given to the role of nature and physicality since Elizabeth Ellum's "E.M. Forster's Greenwood" (1976) first outlined his continuing chronological movement away from mythic allusion. Although Stuart Christie's recent *Worlding Forster* discusses a pastoral tradition in Forster's work, he only analyzes conventional pastoral motifs and limits its application to representations of homosexual identity. I take a broader approach, identifying Forster's evolving relationship to the pastoral genre and arguing that embodied awareness of the natural world is what motivates changes in theme pertaining not just to homosexuality, but also issues of class, empire, and land policy. However, both Forster's early use of the classic pastoral and his later move to an anti-pastoral mode contrast with the non-human world that appears in his final, and most formally experimental novel, *A Passage to India*.

Interpretations of *A Passage to India*, including post-colonial criticism by Lidian Lin and Sara Suleri, have focused primarily on how race and gender inflect Forster's vision of empire. Brian May has performed the most helpful analysis of Forster's environment, asserting that "Forster's frequent depiction of India as 'hollow' rescues it

from [. . .] insidious imperialist idealism” (137). This assessment, however, still evaluates nature as a symbol for Indian people and takes a pessimistic view of what May deems to be its “bathetic” (137) effect. I argue that the animate environment of Forster’s *Passage to India* is not merely a two-dimensional backdrop for the plot; it complicates Forster’s position as a liberal humanist and reveals the novel’s social critique. Its palpable power supercedes the authority of all human races, including India’s Hindu and Muslim sects and the Anglo-Indian colonizers. Moments of environmental disruption provide recurring revisions to key imagery and pivotal plot devices that create the novel’s thematic coherence. Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology clarifies how *A Passage to India* reflects a burgeoning awareness of a changing relationship between humans and the environment.

Traditionally, Forster has been considered to be a liberal humanist, as we see for example in the work of Lionel Trilling and Frederick Crews.¹ Forster’s work reflects a belief that all humans are bound in communal sympathy, but he also surreptitiously counters assumptions of human separateness from the rest of nature. What it means to be human is only realized by understanding what it means to be animal, a creature in a larger environmental habitat that informs so-called “essential” human qualities. Forster assumes that civilization’s advancement depends not only on an Arnoldian goal of “sweetness and light,” but also the development of an embodied sense of place that invigorates a respect for non-human life. In an age that Paul Sheehan has described as “anthropometric”—taking the measure of the ‘human’: as transcendental category, empirical reality, or malleable, indeterminate becoming” (x)—Forster’s liberal humanism

metamorphoses into biocentrism. Complaining of T.S. Eliot's preoccupation with the pain of each individual's life, Forster rejoins, "Even if Man is wiped out other forms of life may get comfortable" (*Commonplace Book* 242). Reflecting back on *Howards End* in 1952, he prioritized the attachment to the place over the people he created: "[There is] not a single character in it for whom I care [. . .] Perhaps the house in *H.E.*, for which I once did care, took the place of people" (Forster *Commonplace Book* 204). And in 1955, he writes that "Man will suppose himself the only form of life, that armed and capsuled imbeciles will penetrate the new regions accessible above and beneath us to murder whatever is stirring [. . .] There was a time when we—i.e. what we came from—communicated. [. . .] The man-modified earth [is] on the way to being man-destroyed" (*Commonplace Book* 214). Forster explicitly acknowledges that "we" are "what we came from" and that other forms of communication exist beyond human language. The liberal desire to "only connect" (*Howards End* epigraph) extends to nature as well as other humans.

Examination of Forster's environmental representations productively complicates his position in the modernist canon and offers new critical insight into the meanings of particular scenes in his novels. Admittedly, most of Forster's prose, apart from the language used in *A Passage to India*, does not exhibit much formal modernist innovation. However, this does not necessarily justify one critic's claim that: "Discussion of E.M. Forster and modernism might well be brief. Forster was scarcely a modernist" (Stevenson 209). Most critics do concede that *A Passage to India* exemplifies the fragmentation of language, at the level of the word, that is the hallmark of a modernist

text. It is not my aim to show that *all* of Forster's work is modernist. His short stories are clearly rooted in an earlier tradition, both in form and theme. Yet Forster's eventual rejection of the traditional pastoral motifs typifies modernist disillusionment with older literary forms. His intermediary works, including *Howards End* and *Maurice*, resist neat categorization. A letter from Edward Upward to Christopher Isherwood in 1926 indicates that Forster's contemporaries did in fact regard him as a modernist, specifically for his attention to "background" issues: "Forster's the only one who understands what the modern novel ought to be [. . .] there's actually less emphasis laid on the big scenes than on the unimportant ones: that's what's so utterly terrific. It's the completely new kind of accentuation" (Furbank II:177). Thematically, Forster's novels grapple with how to sustain some kind of unity in an increasingly fractured world, a fundamental dilemma in the early twentieth-century. Daniel Schwarz's recent *Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel: 1890-1930* aggressively defends Forster's position within the modern canon citing his depiction of human characters as within a "continually changing flux of experience rather than fixed and static" (239). Schwarz also cites Forster's "psychological nuances of character" and "his expectation that the reader will discover relationships and significance" (244) as aspects of his modernist style.² These attributes highlight the importance of Forster's depictions of embodied consciousness and his attention to relationships between humans and the environment as modernist features of his work.

While Forster's environmental representations prior to *A Passage to India* are not ecophenomenological, they aren't stagnant or insignificant either. A closer examination of

how his earlier short stories are patterned after the classic pastoral of Theocritus and Virgil underscores Forster's early concern for natural conservation and stewardship. These tales are also conspicuously tangled in pastoral class distinctions that take a patronizing view of romanticized rural characters. Thus, the non-human environment often manifests itself through a transformed or metamorphosed lower-class individual, rather than operating as an independent being. Yet evidence of Forster's own self-critical awareness of these prejudices and the highly ironic deployment of a narrating consciousness complicate these stories and point towards the development of a more nuanced treatment of people and nature. "The Machine Stops," *Howards End*, and *Maurice* are thematically counter-pastoral, overtly politicizing the relationships classic pastoral conventions obscure and heightening the tension between romantic expectation and disturbing social critique. A finely tuned awareness of embodied knowledge begins to suggest ways in which *all* humans are capable of connecting—with each other across class-barriers and with the natural world. Not yet fully "modernist" in form, these texts begin to experiment with the play between genres of realism and fantasy, the use of mythic paradigms, and inverting devices such as personification, all of which work to formally disorient the reader's expectations. Fidelity to the natural world and physical experience serve as crucial barometers for Forster's critique of English society.

The Lure of the Pastoral in "The Story of a Panic" and "The Other Kingdom"

Forster's early short stories incorporate a classic pastoral schema learned from Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*. As Raymond Williams notes, late nineteenth

century and early twentieth century attitudes towards the country were influenced by men who were educated in elite universities endorsing a particular academic view of rural landscapes: “that set of ideas about the ‘rural’ and the ‘pastoral’, filtered through a version of classical rural literature, but which in the first decades of the century [. . .] was a deep if conventional intellectual conviction: an eyeglass that was lifted, deliberately and proudly, to the honestly observing eye. Fauns, Pan, centaurs, the Golden Age, shepherds, Lycidas, swain, tryst, staunch peasants, churches, immemorial history, demigods, presences, the timeless rhythm of the seasons” (Williams 255-56). Indeed, the conventional pastoral mode is typified by “an urban poet’s nostalgic image of the supposed peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting” (Abrams 210). While a nostalgia for an idealized greenwood, a naïve attitude toward country people, and allusions to chimerical woodland spirits are present in Forster’s short stories, his tales also reflect something the definitions of Abrams and Williams omit from the pastoral—a prominent accent on land use politics. Although dilemmas related to property rights and agricultural livelihood are treated in Virgil and Theocritus, contemporary explanations of the pastoral genre dilute this emphasis. J.H. Stape’s chronology dates Forster’s reading of Virgil’s *Eclogues* within his Lent term at King’s College in 1899 (6). Like the original classic texts, Forster’s short stories aren’t merely simple-minded romps through a romantic, magical-creature fantasy-land. Characters who experience moments of enchanted realization are often confronted with distressing choices between their own fate and fidelity to nature.

Accordingly, Forster's early fiction undoubtedly participates in the pastoral tradition Abrams and Williams describe, but it has a focus on environmental ethics that is often disregarded because contemporary explanations of the pastoral don't explicitly acknowledge this aspect of Theocritus and Virgil's original texts.³ In Virgil, nature's bounty was threatened not only by the winter season, but also by the problem of property rights when soldiers returned from war: "Have we done all this work / Upon our planted and fallow fields so that / Some godless barbarous soldier will enjoy it? / This is what civil war has brought down upon us" (9). Similarly, in Eclogue IX, Moeris laments to Lycidas, "O Lycidas, we never thought that what / Has happened to us was ever going to happen, / And now we've lived to see it. A stranger came / To take possession of our farm, and said: 'I own this place; you have to leave this place.'" (Virgil 71). Political decrees and commercial transactions menaced the shepherd's traditions. Violence wrought by desires for money and ownership similarly shadows the lightness of Forster's short stories, evidencing his belief that monetary interests shouldn't dictate land use.

In "The Story of a Panic," a party of English tourists having a picnic are discussing how the woods no longer give shelter to Pan due to the allure of commercial profit for timber cutting: "All the poetry is going from Nature," the self-important artist in the group laments, "her lakes and marshes are drained, her seas banked up, her forests cut down. Everywhere we see the vulgarity of desolation spreading [. . .] the mere thought that a tree is convertible into cash is disgusting" (12-13). While they are having their conversation, Eustace, a young boy whom the staunch English narrator views as peevish, unhealthy, and spoiled, is whittling a whistle. It is reminiscent of Pan's pipes

but also suggestive of cutting timber, highlighting its uncertain status as a positive symbol of ancient homage or as a harbinger of a destructive force. The group is unexplainably startled by a wind that kicks up in them “brutal, overmastering, physical fear, stopping up the ears, and dropping clouds before the eyes, and filling the mouth with foul tastes” (15). The English narrator admits, “I had been afraid, not as a man, but as a beast” (15).

What occurs to Eustace is covertly linked to a homosexual experience. After they flee the scene, the other characters realize that Eustace is missing and return to the spot to find him lying on the ground with his hands “convulsively entwined in the long grass,” (17) a “peculiar smile” on his face (17), and “some goat’s footmarks in the moist earth beneath the trees” (18). The narrator breaks his reminiscence of the telling of the event to comment “I have often seen that peculiar smile since, both on the possessor’s face and on the photographs of him that are beginning to get into the illustrated papers” (17). An ex-curate in the party ventures to proclaim that, “The Evil One has been very near us in bodily form” (18). Thus, Pan takes on dual possibilities as a bearer of an innate knowledge of the earth’s beauty that leaves the boy deeply happy, or the perpetrator of some unspeakable evil, that is suggestively homosexual in its secrecy and the boy’s reclined state of bliss. The pagan gods are equally poised to lurch toward good or evil, expressing the fear and longing associated with a particular kind of Eros: homosexual love in a heterosexual English society. In classic pastoral texts, it was equally likely for a male to be smitten with love for another man as for a woman. In Virgil’s *Eclogue II* homosexual desire is garlanded with all of the usual romantic conventions: “Corydon fell

in love with a beautiful boy / Whose name was Alexis, the darling of his master,” (11) and Corydon sings his lovesick songs, “O come and live with me in the countryside, / Among humble farms. [. . .] Together singing we will mimic Pan, / Who was the first who taught how reeds could be / Bound together with wax to make a pipe” (Virgil 13).⁴

Eros presented a particularly painful dilemma for the early twentieth century homosexual, who was constantly forced to choose between a chaste and conventional civic existence and the desire to experience homosexual love. Within this conflict of sexualities, organic nature often seems to be associated with homosexual desire in Forster’s work. The reference to Eustace’s smile in the papers may also allude to a Wildean sense of naughty bemusement.

Eustace is anxious to share his epiphany on the hill with another boy, Gennaro, an Italian working at the hotel. Eustace senses that the Italian youth will understand and sympathize with the revelation he experienced, in a way that the upper-class English presumably do not. Eustace leaps into his arms and Gennaro and speaks to him using the intimate form of the personal pronoun, to which the narrator immediately takes affront. As night falls, Eustace runs out into the dark in his bedclothes, dancing and singing what the thick-headed narrator can only interpret as “ludicrous” songs “blessing the great forces and manifestations of Nature” (26). In order to put a stop to it, the narrator bribes Gennaro into tricking Eustace by promising him a profit of ten lire. The boy reluctantly agrees. Although Gennaro leads Eustace to the men who proceed to confine him to his room, which Gennaro has foretold will only conclude in the boy’s death, Gennaro ultimately frees Eustace and they both jump from the younger boy’s window. Eustace

successfully bounds over the parapet of the garden wall and slides to the earth, running off until all that is heard of him are shouts and laughter. When the narrator demands his money back, Gennaro clutches his “ill-gotten” gains, precipitously toppling and dying on the spot like a felled tree, “sway[ing] forward and fall[ing] upon his face in the path” (33). Gennaro, like the wood discussed at the outset of the story, is a rustic who hasn’t escaped the fate of “selling out” nature’s spirit for money. While Eustace is permitted to escape, the Italian peasant boy and the woods of his native country are similarly cut down in the end, conflating human and nature. The rural natives are implicated in selling natural resources for profit but also share the land’s fate, ultimately becoming pawns of British capital.

Forster’s early short stories share the traditional pastoral’s concern for land ethics, but they also replicate prejudices inherent in the archetypal motifs of leisurely retreat. Escapism and fantasy are often associated with travel to foreign countries. “The Story of a Panic” was written in 1902, when Forster was abruptly inspired by the landscape of Ravello, Italy as a young man of 23 years of age: “I sat down in a valley, a few miles above the town, and suddenly the first chapter of the story rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me there” (Forster, Introduction to *Collected Short Stories* 5). Forster, like some of his characters, seems to relate a moment of his own exhilarating brush with a mythic natural muse. In this story and other works that are set in the Mediterranean, such as “Albergo Empedocle” (1904), “The Story of the Siren” (written 1904, but not published until 1920), “The Eternal Moment” (1905), *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), and *A Room With A View* (1908), the pastoral is evoked for the English traveling

abroad—both Forster’s characters as well as the author himself—when they find themselves in exotic locations for recreational pursuits. Williams notes the presence of a colonial pastoral in this era of literature: “The lands of the Empire were an idyllic retreat, an escape from debt or shame, or an opportunity for making a fortune” (Williams 281). The pastoral approach to travel also encouraged mapping classist prejudices onto foreigners.

“The Other Kingdom,” written in 1905 and published in 1909 (Stape 21, 34), relates a tragic demise associated with the incursion of private development in a natural greenwood; it also equates nature with a low-class foreigner. The story begins with a lesson on Virgil’s *Eclogues*, showing that Virgil’s pastorals were standard reading. The tutor, also the tale’s narrator, is instructing Mr. Harcourt Worters’ young ward, Jack Ford, and Mr. Worters’ fiancée, Miss Beaumont, whom he “picked out of Ireland” (67) for his bride despite her lack of title or inheritance. Miss Beaumont’s status as a low-class Irish immigrant makes her another version of the peasant-figure.

She is repeatedly associated with the woods bordering the estate. Miss Beaumont is overcome with emotion when Mr. Worters announces that he has bought her the rights to a wooded property adjoining his manor for a period of ninety-nine years. Disappointment disturbs her happiness when she learns that the lease is only for ninety-nine years, a problem of perpetuity that Mr. Worters later remedies for her. However, conflicts between the two become apparent when Mr. Worter announces his plans to “improve” the copse with a bridge, a paved walkway that “tether[s]” (80) the woods to the house, and a fenced boundary with a gate that locks. Miss Beaumont unsuccessfully

resists these schemes, making clear her desire to de-emphasize man-made structures when she plans a picnic “without servants” where she demands the attendees show respectful reverence for the place. She orders Jack Ford to stand with his tea so that he will block her view of the manor house, a request that Jack happily accommodates to the annoyance of Mr. Worters, who designed the house. Like Genarro and Eustace, Miss Beaumont and the youthful Jack have a close, sympathetic relationship with the natural environment that the adult, upper-class English characters don’t have a capacity to share.

Similar to Genarro’s narrative, Miss Beaumont, and particularly her physical body, become representative of the land itself. The most poignant disagreement over land use comes when Miss Beaumont begs her betrothed to leave the copse open for the rural folk to come carve their initials in the trees as they have done for centuries. Her knowledge of this local custom is surprising as is her switch to the first person as she goes on to plead: “Oh, fence me out, if you like! Fence me out as much as you like! But never in. [. . .] I must be on the outside, I must be where anyone can reach me. Year by year—while the initials deepen—the only thing worth feeling—and at last they close up—but one has felt them” (74). The personal pronouns draw attention to the tradition of women being considered property, in Miss Beaumont’s case a colonial property from Ireland, but it also indicates the sexual anxiety of male ownership over females and nature. Mr Worters’ plans for a gate and lock are reminiscent of a kind of chastity belt, which ensures that the only couple that can express their love through carving initials are the two of them. His refusal of Miss Beaumont’s appeal to allow others to roam the wood and carve their initials in the bark aligns the anxiety of property ownership with the

desire for complete possession of the female. Worters takes out his knife and “dr[aws] her away” to find a tree exclaiming: “Mine! Mine! My haven from the world! My temple of purity. [. . .] Year after year alone together, all in all to each other—year after year, soul to soul, E. B. Everlasting Bliss!” (74). Images of knives, daggers, and swords have long been tropes for male sexuality. His speech takes the values she attributes to the place she had deemed to be a natural refuge and puts those values onto her own body—for him it is not the wooded copse that serves as a place of natural peace and retreat to remain unsullied, but rather her literal body that becomes “the temple of purity” where he finds his “bliss.” From one point of view, this story reveals Forster’s criticism of prejudicial gender stereotypes, which would indicate a more complex social critique evident in this pastoral narrative. However, the fact that Mr. Worter’s prescient alignment of female and woods is affirmed when Miss Beaumont metamorphoses into a tree still equates rustic people with nature.

As many heroines threatened by rape do in other classical tales, especially Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the story implies that Miss Beaumont is transformed into an organic, non-human shape. This conclusion is foreshadowed by her use of the personal pronoun discussed above, as well as by her literal acting out of the role of a birch tree when determining which species of trees populated the copse: “She flung her arms up above her head, close together, so that she looked like a slender column. Then her body swayed and her delicate green dress quivered over it with the suggestion of countless leaves” (62). Thus the reader is prepared to assume she has become a part of the wood when she runs through the foilage and disappears from Mr. Worters, who fears she has been

dallying with his ward, Jack Ford. In parting she cries, “Oh Ford, my lover while I was a woman, I will never forget you, never, as long as I have branches to shade you from the sun” (85). This declaration could have been misinterpreted by Worters, if one considers that Miss Beaumont is not speaking of herself, but rather nature more generally. Even “Ford” has dual connotations since it could also refer to the shallow stream surrounding the copse, a fluid that mingles with and nourishes the trees’ roots. The fact that Ford as a character is a lover of the classic pastoral and a better scholar than the tutor suggests that he would have guessed Miss Beaumont’s fate. When Mr. Worters confronts Jack Ford, Ford admits that he knows what happened to the missing fiancée but refuses to explain. Those who share an emotional connection to the land—rural peasants and the young—can “ford” the gap in understanding that someone who is too bound to the conventions of society cannot.

Although Forster’s treatment of human characters, particularly women, becomes arguably more complicated in this story, the environment remains a relatively inert entity. It requires the protection of humans. While conserving nature for public enjoyment may be a more laudable purpose than corporate consumption or private development, it still involves acquisition for the pleasure of people. It is not only Mr. Worters who represents the salacious desire for ownership in this story. Miss Beaumont requires a full lease in perpetuity and performs a count of the number of beech trees she owns (71). At the time of the gift, the narrator notes, “The joy of possession had turned her head” (63). Her motives are directed by stewardship rather than exclusive ownership, but she ultimately wants to control the way the grounds are used. Thus, the goals the story privileges are

still largely anthropocentric and do not represent the environment as having purposes distinct from human interests.

In 1926, Forster had an experience with land ownership that attests to his later, more biocentric approach to nature. When Forster learned that a four-acre wood, called Piney Copse, was threatened by the possibility that its owner might choose to develop it, he purchased it himself (Furbank II:199). Just as Miss Beaumont wishes her copse to be open for the amusement of other country people, Forster, “would throw the wood open for an annual school treat, going about it on the previous evening hanging the trees with toys, bags of sweets, and swatches of bananas” (Furbank II:199). Yet Forster also recognizes his own penchant towards a zeal for possession, once going so far as to note:

I saw it was not a man who had trodden on the twig and snapped it, but a bird, and felt pleased. My bird. The bird was not equally pleased. Ignoring the relation between us, it took fright [. . .] and flew straight over the boundary hedge into a field, the property of Mrs. Hennessy, where it sat down with a loud squawk. It had become Mrs. Hennessy’s bird. Something seemed grossly amiss here, something that would not have occurred had the wood been larger [. . .] Mrs. Hennessy’s bird took alarm for the second time and flew clean away from us all, under the belief that it belonged to itself.” (“My Wood” 23-24)

Forster’s sense of satiric self-deprecation hints at the theme of the “My Wood” essay, which is *not* a manual on the virtues of ownership and preservation but rather a warning that possession can have a detrimental effect on human character. His essay encourages the reader to adopt the bird’s belief that “it belonged to itself.” He decides, “(in the words of Dante) ‘Possession is one with loss’” (“My Wood” 25). Later, due to a hitch in the lease, Forster was forced to sell his woods, and he determined to sell it to the National Trust rather than another individual (Furbank II:202-03). These biographical entries show a shift in understanding nature and the non-human as part of one’s “property”—an

entity that should be controlled by humans and might even be used to equate owners with the land of their country homes, as we saw with the conflation of people and nature in “The Story of a Panic” and “The Other Kingdom.” In Forster’s later years, he advances the idea that nature and the non-human animals that inhabit it may have emotions and desires of their own, an attitude that will also become evident in his later fiction.

These early stories represent a classic pastoral vision of nature that Forster later rejected in favor of more diverse environmental representations, such as those seen in *A Passage to India*. But even these early tales of metaphysical transformation and folkloric mystery are charged with themes that will continue to shape Forster’s environmental ethic. Miss Beaumont’s metamorphosis into a tree as protest against private development prefigures the problem of industrial, urban encroachment on rural landscapes that Forster will take up more explicitly in *Howards End*. Similarly, the uneasy conflation of foreigners, children, or lower-class people with nature, while not entirely eradicated from later novels, functions more explicitly as a social critique in *Howards End* and *Maurice*. Forster’s intermediary fiction becomes counter-pastoral, using conventional pastoral motifs as a sophisticated instrument for pulling back the softer, more playful layers of rustic pipes and flirtatious chases to reveal very real, pressing social concerns. In this process, nature is associated with the health of the human body generally, rather than the body of a particular class of persons.

**Anti-Pastoral and the Fantasy of the Green Retreat in “The Machine Stops,”
Howards End, and *Maurice***

Raymond Williams explains that Victorian literature of urbanity was predominately “an imagery of the inhuman and the monstrous” (Williams 216) which “identified the crowding of cities as a source of social danger” and included “the loss of customary human feelings” (217). The encroachment Williams describes resembles an English version of Leo Marx’s “Machine in the Garden.” The startling incongruity of the speed and noise of industrialism ripping its way through a reflective and sedate pastoral setting creates what Marx terms a “complex pastoral.” The countryside pastoral conceived by Virgil is changed by a power “that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city” (Marx 32); instead, “tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety” (Marx 16). As the use of the term “pastoral” has expanded in various ways, it has been used “as an oblique way to criticize the values and hierarchical class structure of the society of its time” (Abrams 211). In order to clarify the distinction between Forster’s use of classic pastoral tropes in the early short stories and a more conscious use of the pastoral as a critique of his own social moment in the three narratives featured in this section, I refer to Terry Gifford’s term, anti-pastoral, or counter-pastoral. According to Gifford, anti-pastoral literature “expos[es] the distance between reality and the pastoral convention when that distance is so conspicuous as to undermine the ability of the convention to be escaped as such” (128). This theory of the pastoral grafts social realism to the classic pastoral, creating a more disturbing pastoral myth designed to agitate society’s awareness of themes related to both class and conservation. Dissonances between upper and lower classes highlight

the problem of erasing the presence of labor in the landscape or associating peasants with spirits of nature. Forster's anti-pastoral stories also associate the organic world with the health of the human body. These themes are evident in "The Machine Stops" (1909), *Howards End* (1910), and *Maurice* (written in 1914, although not published until 1971).

"The Machine Stops" presents an apocalyptic drama of the combustion of the mechanized city, while *Howards End*, published only a year later, treats the threat of the machine's incursion into the English countryside. Forster locates England's social decline in its detachment from nature, precipitated by the hurried pace and increased mechanization of city centers. "The Machine Stops" literalizes the atrophy that occurs in both the body and man-made civilization during prolonged separation from immediate sensory experience and the natural world. In "The Machine Stops" human life has moved underground after devastating the earth's surface, and people live in separate cubicles tended by a vast machine, not unlike Forster's later description of the Adelaide building: "It towers into the sky, it plunges into the depths; in its vast cube are accommodated hundreds of business men with their clerks, typewriters, and anxieties all complete, all making money as hard as they can for the sake of the Empire, and upon its roof, which is flat, are a garden, an orchard, and a putting green, where the anxieties of the business men can take another form" ("London is a Muddle" 353-54). Society is reduced to geometric cubicles of mechanical production with nothing but an artificial pastoral icing smeared on top. The leisure and camaraderie the pastoral are meant to engender are compacted into a man-made spectacle designed for furthering competitive sport, what Forster calls "another form" of business anxiety, rather than genuine

recreation. Human frailty is not represented by a failure to conquer the environment; instead the degradation of the human species is marked by a failure to live in symbiosis with the natural environment.

In “The Machine Stops” the increasing industrial negation of tactile experience and the erosion of rural environments degrades social structures and healthy independent thinking. Initially, the future society appears to be an industrial utopia of shared intellectualism. It features individual rooms, each “hexagonal in shape like the cell of a bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. An arm-chair is in the center, by its side a reading-desk—that is all the furniture. And in the arm-chair there sits a swaddled lump of flesh” (109). Like babies, every human’s need is effortlessly met so that the life of the mind can be the sole concern. Two-dimensional “plates” on the wall, not unlike flat-panel television screens today, convey “blurred” images of anyone with whom a person wishes to communicate. With the mere flip of a switch, the room is filled with the messages of correspondence: “All the accumulations of the last three minutes burst upon her. The room was filled with the noise of bells, and speaking tubes. What was the new food like? Could she recommend it? Had she any ideas lately? Might one tell her one’s own ideas?” (113). The baby-like figure, Vashti, is, ironically, a mother. Vashti can communicate with a wide range of people anywhere, listen to music, and even give lectures in the hive-like living system known as “the machine.” Yet, as the story progresses, a heightened sense of isolation siphons emotion and insight.

When Vashti's son, Kuno, has something he would prefer not to tell his mother over the Machine, the reader gets an initial clue that there might be something pernicious about the machine's paternalism. Vashti treats the machine like a god (110, 114). The analogy to an empire that quells sedition and encourages a nearly religious fanaticism for progress is readily apparent. Vashti's son finally convinces her to venture from her cubicle and she is exposed to "the horror of direct experience" (117). Vashti is driven by the pursuit of ideas, but when her son forces her to unaccustomed bodily travel via a flying device, "a relic from the former age" (117), she scrupulously shuts out any possibility of natural inspiration: "Cover the window, please. These mountains give me no ideas" (121). The forces that stirred Keats and Shelley have no ability to reach the urban mind: "All the old literature, with its praise of Nature and its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child" (117). Vashti's attitude mirrors modernist concerns with exculpating romantic sentimentality. Nature has been driven out of the human imagination; yet, ultimately the human characters must rely on the daunting and unknown wilds of their planet's exterior to survive.

When they meet face-to-face, Kuno tells his mother that he has risked exile to climb out of the machine to the forbidden natural world. There, he begins to grasp the extent of what has been lost to the "poisoned darkness" of the machine and comes to believe salvation exists with the few "homeless" people who still live in the outer environment: "I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them. They are hiding in the mists and ferns until our civilization stops. [. . .] Humanity has learnt its lesson" (146). Further, Kuno's knowledge of those living in the natural world is not described with

abstract, second-hand information, but rather in terms of direct physical interaction—Kuno has “seen,” “spoken” and “loved” them. But Kuno’s adventure is abruptly halted as he is dragged back by the machine’s worm-like tentacles. It is not that Forster celebrates the condition of homelessness, which he personally abhorred in his own experience of renting and leasing property throughout his life, but rather that homelessness is the ultimate sacrifice for any Forster character. The decision to uproot oneself from one’s local place and protective architectural shell reflects the dire cultural malaise that thwarts growth of character and body.

The machine retaliates against Kuno’s insurrection by warning humans from first-hand ideas that “do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by love and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy?” (135). The machine begins to pause and flicker with malfunction, “disfigure[ing] the symphonies” (139) and causing interruptions in medication. The people living in the machine, however, readily adapt to these erratic failings and they are uncritically subsumed into daily existence. Here, one can sense Forster’s critique of society’s apathy. The citizens are so accustomed to having their needs met by others that they have grown into dependent sycophants incapable of revolution, or they are so caught up in being polite and well-bred that all the critical inquiry of true advancement is euthanized, creating an unfeeling and inhumane society.⁶

Before Kuno can persuade his mother to climb out with him on a second attempt at escape, they both perish when the machine explodes. The final image, eerily prescient of recent American imperial history, is of an airplane crashing through the machine

“exploding as it went, rending gallery after gallery with its wings of steel” (146). The attainment of a fully intellectual, mechanized existence is a dystopia rather than a utopia. Further, the upper earth, where the “sun grew very feeble” against the “low colourless hills” is not rendered as a jubilant Eden either. The looming threat of danger and extinction in the nebulous “mist” is a rather bleak new world. The only hope for the future life is left to the “outcasts” who roam the grassy hills, not in a Virgilian idealism, but as exiles who know that to start over is still preferable to the solipsistic steel trap of urban intellectualism. Kuno and Vashti face their doom mourning for “the sin against the body [. . .] the centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend” (145), recognizing that the very means of intellectual understanding is the body’s ability to feel and “apprehend” the surrounding world.

Although the characters in both “The Machine Stops” and *Howards End* seem to find a remedy in pastoral escape, neither is satisfactory; Forster’s natural spaces begin to resemble the anti-pastoral tradition. In these works, the hope for a green retreat, where humans can “revert with a tired sigh to the woods” (*Commonplace Book* 156) seems to be a fantastical solution to the growing concern of industrialization. Urban technology is shown to be a dystopia, but the country is no utopia either. The homeless outcasts from the machine are furtive exiles, struggling to exist in the indeterminate mist of the outer green world; and while the protagonists of *Howards End* may seem to secure an idyllic pastoral home, Forster’s text is actually an anti-pastoral novel, subtly undermining the expected conventions of the pastoral genre, and challenging his readers to critique the

pastoral fantasy rather than “buy” into a false sense of ease. The city is rejected, but the wished-for panacea of beginning again in an unspoiled countryside is also subtly critiqued; a pastoral ending does not successfully erase the problems of class or the hardship entailed by a green retreat.

The tension between the degradation of urban spaces and the renewal of natural spaces has long been recognized as a prominent theme in *Howards End*, but the health of the flesh is also a central environmental issue in the novel. Leonard Bast, the struggling London clerk the Schlegel sisters attempt to rescue from the abyss of poverty, sires the child who symbolizes the novel’s model of hope for future generations. Yet despite Bast’s importance as a progenitor for a better future, Bast’s body is afflicted by urban poverty. Although Forster does romanticize the lower classes, it is important to note that he does not locate modern decline in a eugenic argument, but rather in a pointed condemnation of upper-class mobility that negligently treads on those, who but for the fetters of modernization, could have been the kind of rural worker whom Forster identifies as the backbone of English moral character:

A young man, colourless, toneless, who had already the mournful eyes above a drooping mustache that are so common in London, and that haunt some streets of the city like accusing presences. One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town. [. . .] Margaret, noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tail coat and a couple of ideas. (120)

Ideas will not fortify the body. The fact that humans are also animals is not only acknowledged in Forster’s fiction, but also praised rather than being shunned as bestial. Indeed, “the glory of the animal” must be recognized as a necessary aspect of the best

kind of human. Forster's mocking reference to the "tail" biological evolution has divested from the human body is cunningly refigured as a fashionable social appendage marking the abject decline of our "urban" species. The proverbial "monkey suit" is more appalling than any real component of our animal kinship with other species.

The novel's satirical stance towards "progress" is also evidenced by city dwellings that deaden any aesthetic infusion of health or inspiration. The impoverishment of Leonard Bast is typified by squalid urban living conditions. Leonard attempts to elevate his mind by reading the aesthetic principles of Ruskin: 'Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession, and first (for of the shafts enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this church—its luminousness" (51). But the beauty of Ruskin's words and ideas can't paper-over the reality of Leonard's flat: "First (for the absence of ventilation enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this flat—its obscurity. [. . .] 'My flat is dark as well as stuffy.' Those were the words for him" (51). Imagining what he would write about his own surroundings, Leonard can copy the style of Ruskin's prose, but he can't replicate the sense of sanctuary—his own space won't allow him the words. Forster implies there is no possibility for creative fulfillment or uplifting sentiment in actual urban architecture.

Like Leonard himself, "third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town," even food is deprived of beauty and sustenance when it is too far removed from its organic origins:

They began with a soup square, which Leonard had just dissolved in some hot water. It was followed by the tongue—a freckled cylinder of meat, with a little jelly at the top, and a great deal of yellow fat at the bottom—ending with another

square dissolved in water (jelly: pineapple), which Leonard had prepared earlier in the day. (56)

The geometric shapes of the gelatinous molds suggest mechanical reproduction. The compact “square” and “cylinder” no longer resemble any organic matter, but are rather artificially flavored with exotic “pineapple” to lure one’s imagination to some tropical fantasy rather than the reality of the dismal food itself. The traditional aura of food preparation and the aesthetic pleasure of eating have been replaced by artificial flavoring. The language is also devoid of sensory modifiers, taking on the shape of the jello’s cube in a condensed block: “(jelly: pineapple).” The quality of the food is part of the atmosphere of Leonard’s flat, which resists beauty, both rhetorically and physically.

Instead the description hints at the class inequity that causes such a dismal product. There are whiffs of human labor, the bodies that industry consumes or the people who have been “sucked into the town” in words like “tongue” (a human part as well as an animal part) and “freckled,” suggesting the skin of country children exposed to the sun. Society’s failure to see this slimy underbelly is the “yellow fat at the bottom”—the unhealthy greed and cowardice that no pre-prepared promise of riches and leisure can eviscerate. The bottom dregs of the lower class—those who don’t even have a job or tenement rooms—don’t even appear as characters: “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend they are gentlefolk” (35). That Forster’s narrator explicitly points out this absence not only participates in a middle-class myopia, but also acknowledges it in a way that invites censure. Within the upper-wedge of the lower class that the novel does treat, it is clear

that hand-to-mouth urban wage-earners are impoverished not just monetarily, but also bodily, emotionally, and intellectually by their complete separation from nature.

Leonard is a thwarted peasant-figure of the pastoral tradition. With him, Forster's relationship with the pastoral tradition becomes more complex. While Forster seems to be sustaining the traditional ideal that those who work the land are happy figures, as Leonard might have been if the availability of jobs had not encouraged migration to urban centers, Forster is also explicitly drawing the reader's attention to the politics of class and mobility to reveal the precarious position of the lower class. In this manner *Howards End* borrows from the pastoral, but it also exposes what the pastoral is traditionally meant to evade. William Empson explains the primary function of the pastoral convention: "The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way)" (Empson 11-12). Leonard's pointed inability to make Ruskin's language fit his circumstances is the exact opposite of allowing lower class characters to speak in "learned and fashionable language." Moreover, the relation Forster depicts is anything but "beautiful." It encourages repugnance.

This reaction isn't limited to the aforementioned body, home, or food either. The Schlegel sisters' initial efforts to encourage Leonard Bast—which seemingly create a "beautiful relation between rich and poor" through intellectual conversations about midnight walks—all go dreadfully awry. Helen's desire to help becomes an

inappropriate and regretted sexual tryst with the married Mr. Bast, after which she attempts to assuage her guilt with payment. Her behavior is not unlike Henry Wilcox's treatment of Mrs. Bast, a former prostitute he frequented when he was married to his first wife. Even the well-intentioned Margaret engages in reproachable behavior. After her marriage to Henry Wilcox, she becomes embarrassed at how Helen and the Basts crash her step-daughter's upper-class engagement party, and does everything in her power to shuffle them off after Mrs. Bast's undecorous displays of sloppy drunkenness. There is nothing pretty about these class relations. The crucial aspect of the text that many critics overlook is the way the text shows up the errors of the Schlegel sisters' idealist middle-class morality. David Bradshaw's analysis is helpful on this point. Commenting on Margaret's relief that she and her sister will live contentedly at Howards End, Bradshaw explains:

Margaret [. . .] seems oblivious to the fact that Jacky, at that very moment, must either be teetering on the edge of a far from figurative abyss or, more likely, already well on her way to the bottom of it. This further evidence of the Schlegels' blindness, crassness, hypocrisy and bigotry might be parceled together in support of the view that Forster never intended us to be as favourably disposed towards them as the first few chapters of the novel seem to encourage us to be. Forster's aim may have been to discredit the Schlegels by exposing them as merely skin-deep progressives. (Bradshaw 157)

The text's deliberate smashing of the sisters' original social aims further explains Margaret's marriage into and the narrator's subsequent justification of capitalism. Even the rebellious Helen is glad to be relieved of Leonard and is warming up to Henry Wilcox by the end. The novel couldn't be more emphatic about how the sisters have destroyed Leonard, their prodigal liberal project: Margaret's wealthy step-son, Charles Wilcox, who stands to inherit his father's corporate fortune confronts Bast with a drawn sword, and

Leonard, thrown off-balance is killed when he collapses underneath the weight of a toppling bookshelf representing the ideas and privilege his circumstances have made inaccessible. Emblems of power, money, and education coalesce to produce Bast's death. Again, this maneuver inverts the usual pastoral plotlines of upper and lower class characters: "Their fundamental use was to show the labour of the king or saint in the serious part and in the comic part the people, as 'popular' as possible, for whom he laboured [. . .] Usually it provides a sort of parody or parallel in low life to the serious part" (Empson 29). In *Howards End*, the lower class plot is decidedly tragic and the trajectories of the lower and middle/upper-class characters are starkly contrasted rather than paralleled.

Even Ruth Wilcox, a member of the landed gentry who is endowed with the classic pastoral qualities of nature goddesses, can't survive the poisonous airs of the city. At times, Ruth Wilcox resembles a personification of a mythological Demeter, recalling Forster's fascination with pastoral mythology in other short stories such as "Other Kingdom" and "The Story of a Panic." However, in this narrative, an upper-class matriarch, rather than a foreign peasant, is associated with nature, suggesting that all classes of humans are capable of being tied to the land. Mrs. Wilcox carries the symbol of summer harvest as she takes her evening walk: "Trail, trail, went her long dress over the sopping grass, and she came back with her hands full of the hay that was cut yesterday" (4). Although Mrs. Wilcox married into the nouveau-riche commercial class to save her rural home, and voices socially conservative views on female domesticity, she remains firmly rooted in a generosity that seems to emanate from her connection to the

rural landscape. She takes no heed of her trailing gown getting ruined by the dew. And although she disagrees with the progressive notions of the Schlegel sisters, she not only invites them into her home, but also chooses Margaret as a spiritual heir who will value the natural state of her home, rather than a familial heir who might have the whole place razed for a profit. Margaret proves her ability to appreciate Ruth Wilcox's identification with her home when she rushes to join her for an impractical, and eventually thwarted, journey from London to Howards End. Margaret is willing to prioritize place-based values that the rest of the Wilcox family scoffs at. Ruth Wilcox's wish to pass on her home to Margaret reveals that sustaining the rural landscape matters more to her than upholding social convention. In other words, Mrs. Wilcox rejects expectations of primogeniture in favor of privileging alternative connections based on environmental values. Her presence permeates her country home, and even those who inhabit it, after her death. Margaret reflects: "I feel that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that woman's mind. She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house and the tree that leans over it" (222). In this quote, Forster's idea of flesh seems to expand. Unlike Miss Beaumont's metamorphosis, Ruth Wilcox doesn't exactly become the tree, instead she is a presence embedded in the place. Therefore, while the environment itself is not represented as an alive, independent being in this text, the relationship between humans and environment does become more complex as Forster begins to experiment with mixing genres of realism and pastoral fantasy.

The architecture of the home becomes yet another kind of animated body. For Forster, the rural landscape and the robust body are corollaries of England's best virtues,

and both are threatened by urban encroachment. As Jon Hegglund succinctly remarks: “The health of the individual bodies and the collective health of the nation are intimately connected in the quasi-organic space of the house” (399). The Schlegel family home is personified in its final demise—“a house which had always been human, and had not mistaken culture as an end” (269). Similarly, *Howards End* is given a prescient consciousness and haunting sense of being a fleshly organism: “It was the heart of the house beating, faintly at first, then loudly, martially” (210). Yet Forster also reverses the expected literary device of personification by imbuing human bodies with the attributes of architecture. When Leonard Bast reflects, “‘My flat is dark as well as stuffy.’ Those were the words for him” (51), the phrase “the words for him” implies that he is describing the condition of his own body as well as his flat. Moreover, Leonard’s body takes on the qualities of a home when he approaches *Howards End*. The house that had been personified by a beating heart now is used to describe the portals of Leonard’s palpitating aorta: “He felt in curious health: doors seemed to be opening and shutting inside his body” (335). The valves of his heart become doors to the cramped rooms of his chest. Place is fused with body as Forster suggests that both a proper home embedded in the living land and a strong body invigorated by outdoor activity are what England needs.

Margaret’s eventual acquisition of *Howards End* could signal a hopeful promise that society may learn to value the non-human environment, but the movement from the London flat to *Howards End* is fraught with compromise. The circulation of commodities and their entanglement in the personal relationships of the Schlegels and the

Wilcoxes is the pivotal conflict of the novel. As Henry Turner has noted, the degradation of English character seems to be prompted by “a *super*-abundance of objects, people, property, and spaces” (330). The material environment becomes transformed from substance to monetary value. The dizzying array of property owned by the Wilcox family illustrates this phenomenon of industrial commercialism. In the conclusion of *Howards End*, Forster seems to suggest that the solution to urban consumption is seeded in the same alternate natural environment he gestured to at the end of “The Machine Stops.” Margaret Schlegel observes: “This craze for motion has only set in during the last hundred years. It may be followed by a civilization that won’t be movement, because it will rest on the earth” (355). One’s awareness of an identity that is anchored in a specific genius loci and nurtured by valuing land and organic life over human-centered industrial progress is posited as the salve to modernity’s ills. Indeed, the most celebratory of Virgil’s eclogues involves a group of friends who have “left the city” to go to a country house: “A harvest home was being held for Demeter” (90). The friends enjoy their satiated stupor while around them, “the scorched cicadas carried their chirping labour on, and the tree frog croaked far off in the dense thorn break [. . .] bees zoomed around and about the fountains. All things smelt of a rich harvest and fruiting--- abundance of pears by our feet and apples rolled at our side and branches burdened with damsons earthward drooped” (Virgil 94). The analogy of *Howards End* to the “country house” that the urban dwellers, like the Schlegels, are journeying towards, and the feast in honor of “Demeter,” or Mrs. Wilcox, could suggest conscious allusions to a surfeit of bountiful goodness.

Yet Forster's ending is anti-pastoral in its darkly shaded subversion of a pastoral ending. Margaret acknowledges: "London's creeping.' She pointed over the meadow—over eight or nine meadows, but at the end of them was a red rust" (355). As Daniel Born points out: "The concluding hymn to pastoral calm does not drown out the more disturbing urban sights and sounds" (157). The looming threat of urban expansion is a reminder that England's future is by no means secure; Forster's agrarian resolution is neither tidy nor pat. Even Helen's final exclamation of a flush summer harvest invokes ominous echoes of the dead Mrs. Wilcox and Leonard Bast, who was also "cut" down by a "reaper" of sorts when Charles wielded a scythe-like sword. Helen's proclamation that "We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!" (359) contains troubling ambiguities. Helen's optimism directly contrasts with her more practical sister's view beyond the "very end" of their meadow. Additionally, the term "never" has dual connotations—it can mean that this is the best crop yet, or that this is the final crop of such a yield and its equal will never be seen again. As Gifford notes of William Blake's anti-pastoral poetry, "he exposes pastorally-comforting images, images of Heaven as self-deceiving constructs" (134). Forster's reliance on a "happy" harvest ending strains the limits of believable optimism and actually creates an anti-pastoral effect. The effect of a conclusion where nationalities intermarry, middle and upper classes mingle wealth, and the atavist progeny of society is the offspring of an unwed mother and a father who poetically walked the fields at night in an Emersonian quest for enlightenment is meant to be unsatisfyingly unrealistic. The disruption of verisimilitude suggests that part of Forster's strategy is to show his readers that such a resolution can

only exist in the realm of fantasy and could never be realized in current English society. As a result, the novel protests against the feeling of satisfactory ease the stereotypical pastoral is expected to evoke.

However, on an individual level, valuing nature and one's own connections to the earth more convincingly improves several of Forster's fictional protagonists. Although the fate of humankind is doomed in "The Machine Stops" and Vashti cannot be convinced to re-examine her revulsion towards "the terrors of direct experience" (115), her son Kuno does achieve greater awareness through discovering the power of sensory perception. The machine routinely executes athletes because it is "a demerit to be muscular" (124) in the "advanced" society of abstract ideas, yet Kuno comes back from his struggle to make contact with the outside environment enlivened by a new perspective: "Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is loveable and desirable and strong" (125). Therefore, Kuno learns that one's connection to the land is also dependent upon a familiarity with the terrain of one's own body. Both Kuno and Leonard are characters who test the limits of bodies and minds that have been enervated by urban culture. They aspire to a full, virtuous life emanating from an appreciation of sensory, physical experience in natural settings. Yet these pastoral transformations are incomplete. Society does not benefit from what Kuno and Leonard have learned because both characters are denied the necessary "return." Kuno dies before he can share his discoveries with anyone but his mother, and Leonard is actually killed in the pastoral retreat of Howards End, unable to achieve resolution with Helen or teach his son the

dangers of the city. Instead, it is the reader who must learn the lesson and complete the social change. The reader is challenged to question why the “happy endings” of Forster’s pastoral novels seem fanciful and unsatisfying. Forster’s anti-pastoral disquiet points towards values that must be adopted by an entire culture if any actual resolutions of tolerance and understanding are to be achieved in Forster’s real, contemporary society.

Learning that truth and value are inherent in physical experiences and not just confined to abstract intellectualism is the defining lesson of Forster’s novel concerning homosexuality, *Maurice*. Forster publicly denounced the elevation of intellect over the primacy of the body during his lifetime in essays such as “The Challenge of Our Time,” saying, “But the difficulty is this: where does the body stop and the spirit start?” (323). His most profound expression of this belief is conveyed in *Maurice*, which was published posthumously. Living through the Oscar Wilde trials may have stimulated an interest in Wilde’s mores and the “wild” impulses of the body.⁷ Indeed, a homosexual writer who values the environment may have an innate investment in defining what is “natural.” While serving as Secretary to a Maharaja in India, Forster and the Maharaja had to discuss advances Forster had made to another man; the conversation was reportedly framed in terms of what is “natural”:

“Why a man and not a woman? Is not a woman more natural?”

“Not in my case. I have no feeling for women.”

“Oh but that alters everything. You are not to blame.”

“I don’t know what ‘natural’ is.”

“You are quite right, Morgan—I ought never to have used the word. No, don’t worry—don’t worry. I am only distressed you did not tell me everything before—I might have saved you so much pain.” (Furbank II:83)

The Maharaja was quite accepting of Forster's sexuality and insinuates by his apology that the word "natural" connotes one's own instinctive sexual impulses, including a desire for a person of the same sex. Yet British society was not so open-minded.

Redefining what is "natural" in terms of biodiversity—being able to show how what might initially be considered gross or marred is actually necessary to a well-functioning ecosystem—begins to offer possibilities for redefining what is natural sexually as well.

Forster hints at this in an enigmatic statement made in April 1904: "He asked himself, in a dreamy way, why people were so sure that plants were not conscious of procreation, for it might be 'the side by which we might understand them'" (Furbank I:111). Society's assumptions that it knows nature's secrets and can master environmental forces represent the same kinds of fearful and repressive control it attempts to exercise over sexuality.

Forster explores the nexus between nature and sex more fully in *Maurice*. The bildungsroman of *Maurice* positions the naturalness, or acceptableness, of homosexuality as the enlightened goal of Maurice Hall's education. For Forster, embodied knowledge challenges cultural assumptions. Forster's work consistently insinuates that intellect detached from embodied knowledge is often turbid, repressed, and ineffective.

Maurice encourages a respect for knowledge defined by an embodied interaction with the world and a verification of one's own instinctive drives: "The 'vast curve' of Maurice's life includes progress to a relationship in which the flesh educates the spirit and develops 'the sluggish heart and the slack mind against their will'" (Summers 97). Maurice's first lover, Clive Durham, attempts to confine homosexual love to a platonic artistic philosophy: "Landscape is the only safe subject—or perhaps something

geometric, rhythmical, inhuman absolutely” (93). Clive has to abandon organic subject matter for something entirely mathematical and synchronized. This allows the wild to be framed in neat shapes and governed by known formulas. The application of Clive’s philosophy to their relationship is apparent when Clive declines Maurice’s request for a kiss, a desire inspired in part by a response to the natural surroundings—the waking sparrows and the sound of the ringdoves beginning to coo in the woods (93). When Maurice finally begins to realize that Clive’s metaphysical love will not satisfy his own ideal of passion and romance, he asks himself, “Did [Clive] suppose he was made of paper?” (184), emphasizing the distinction between the abstract life of purely intellectual pursuits and a fuller life acknowledging the pleasures of the body. When Maurice finally does find a partner who shares his ideal of a more physical love, in the gamekeeper Alec Scudder, the novel’s discourse also becomes more embodied. In contrast to the abstract level of communicative language used to define Maurice’s and Clive’s relationship, Maurice tries to explain his feelings to Alec by “trying to get underneath the words. He continued, feeling his way to a grip” (221). The prose is charged with sexual innuendo, but also suggests that language merely clothes the truth Maurice and Alec seek to articulate through direct and tangible action, rather than intellectual justification.

Forster inverts the values normally associated with homosexuality through making what might be considered “deformities” in nature into something positive. Maurice initially perceives nature with an unappreciative eye, wanting to see what is supposed to be aesthetically pleasing. Yet when Maurice ponders the imperfections of nature, hoping to find one example of nature’s beauty fulfilled, he finds himself

confronting Alec and homosexual desire: “On one spray every flower was lopsided, the next swarmed with caterpillars or bulged with galls. The indifference of nature! And her incompetence! He leant out of the window to see whether she couldn’t bring it off once, and stared straight into the bright brown eyes of a young man” (179). Maurice must reconfigure what he considers “natural” not only in how he defines “errors” in nature’s flowering plants, but also in the bloom of sexual love that Alec stirs within him.

Maurice’s desire doesn’t erase the boundaries these distinctions evoke as much as it challenges the standard dialectic. Moreover, the natural imagery is less symbolic of the traditional pastoral and tuned to a finer understanding of ecological operations that slyly suggest what initially appears repulsive to social aesthetics, may actually be quite natural.

Lopsided flowers weighted with insects in symbiotic relation to the floral environment are part of a thriving ecosystem. It is not coincidental that when Maurice poses his apostrophe to nature, requesting a perfect specimen, nature responds with Alec.

Likewise, the reader is invited to reconsider whether natural “imperfections,” be they caterpillars or supposedly deviant sexual desires, don’t all have a proper place in the overall health of the naturally abundant world. Now that he has met Alec, Maurice’s impulses to express love as an embodied act are aligned with a flight into nature’s own fecundity: “How the tangle of flowers and fruit wreathed his brain!” (191). Forster remakes homosexual desire into something overflowing with organicity.

In Forster’s postscript, Maurice escapes with Alec to the greenwood, suggesting that social convention, like the community in the machine, has become the distortion of what is natural. Homosexual desire can only be consummated in the woods, where

nature, if not society, accepts it. Although Stuart Christie argues that Forster's ending "endorses the homosexual silence" of Arnoldian civic society, this reading diminishes the novel's use of a complex anti-pastoral fantasy to communicate a discomfort and dissatisfaction in the reader which is meant to propel a critique. Alec is still prominently used as a rustic peasant who is closer to nature, but unlike the earlier stories, the upper-class character explicitly acknowledges the superiority of Alec's knowledge. Maurice ruminates, "How did a country lad like that know so much about me?" (214). Further, the characters presumed intention of long-term romantic coupling could be read as an attempt to suggest equality. An ability on the part of the rustic to point out flaws in the main-stream society is a feature of the anti-pastoral or, as Empson calls it, the "mock-pastoral": "So far as the person described is outside society because too poor for its benefits he is independent, as the artist claims to be, and can be a critic of society; so far as he is forced by this into crime he is the judge of the society that judges him" (Empson 17). While Christie's position may be too obstinate in its failure to recognize how Forster's own sexual relationships with working class men suggest a more complex understanding of these relations than Christie gives him credit for (a perspective I will elaborate on below), it is true that the sacrifices associated with the rural ideal often hinge on troubling class distinctions.

Thus, during the series of events that must take place for Margaret to eventually acquire title to *Howards End*, she is forced to realize the limits of her own liberal idealism. While she ardently professes the rights of women and a humanitarian responsibility towards the lower classes, she also comes to realize: "The very soul of the

world is economic, and that the lowest abyss is not the absence of love but the absence of coin" (63). She and her sister will enjoy the peaceful satisfaction that rural living offers, but the novel explicitly recognizes that pastoral harmony is still dependent upon the privilege of ownership material wealth makes possible. Consequently, Leonard Bast is haplessly manipulated and seduced by characters from the upper and middle class. Despite Lucy Schelgel's love-for-love's-sake affair with him and his hope to better himself through long walks in the country, his life is tragically cut short at Howards End. The ability to "see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth" demands Leonard's sacrifice. His death is required to finally allow punishment for Charles Wilcox's petty bourgeois selfishness and create a catalyst for Henry Wilcox's new-found humility. To see the characters in their rotundity, to "see it whole" relies on the "transitoriness" of Leonard's life and the "eternal youth" created by his early death, a cheap benefit for a comfortable bourgeoisie.

The novel's ambivalent treatment of class is not surprising considering that Forster was also tinged with prejudice. In a letter to an Anglo-Indian friend written in 1916 while Forster was in Alexandria, he shows a tormented awareness of his own fluctuating responses to racist attitudes: "I came inclined to be pleased and quite free from racial prejudice, but in 10 months I've acquired an instinctive dislike to the Arab voice, the Arab figure [. . .] exactly the emotion that I censured in the Anglo-Indian towards the natives. What does this mean? [. . .] It's damnable and disgraceful and it's in me" (Furbank II:29). What stands out about this acknowledgement is not only an admission of class and race prejudice but also a genuine attempt to root it out. It is this

willingness for self-censure and individual change that must be considered in tandem with Forster's manifestations of class prejudice. In another letter written a year later, Forster proudly declares his affiliation with the lower class while in India, insisting that it is the "Middle class people" who "smell" on account of their snobbery towards "the lower class whom we love" (Furbank II:41). This is not to say that Forster consistently conquered the prejudicial underpinnings of his upbringing, but to show that he vocally and repeatedly endeavored against it. Actions he took in his own life bear out a pattern of resistance. Forster taught at the Working Men's College in London for twenty years or more, an experience that he drew on in constructing *Leonard Bast* (Furbank I:173-74). Forster's first physical love affair was with an Egyptian tram-conductor, whom Forster continued to correspond with after the physical relationship was over. Furbank notes, "He had, or so he felt, broken through the barriers of class and colour" (Furbank II:40). Forster's long-term lover and friend, Bob Buckingham, was a working-class policeman who "would attack Forster over class-attitudes" (Furbank II:183). Once again we see that while Forster overcame many class barriers his own social milieu still sanctioned, he continued to wrestle with the prejudices that remained.

When confronted with the choice between preserving the countryside and building more homes to relieve London's working class from their cramped urban slums, he finds himself resisting the humanitarian side: "Well, says the voice of planning and progress, 'why this sentimentality? People must have houses.' They must, and I think of working-class friends in north London who have to bring up four children in two rooms, and many are even worse off than that. But I cannot equate the problem. It is a collision

of loyalties. I cannot free myself from the conviction that something irreplaceable has been destroyed” (“Challenge of our Time” 59). On one hand, the critical emphasis on Forster’s liberal humanism eschews the significance of his biocentrism. One could argue that it is not that Forster thinks the lower classes aren’t worthy of rural benefits; rather he chooses conservation over the influx of people in general, not necessarily a particular class. Wilfred Stone defends Forster’s environmentalism: “That [conflicts between preservation and industry] often come down to conflicts between the haves and have-nots goes without saying, but they are not neat conflicts, with the bad guys on one side and nature on the other. [. . .] It is the same problem that every ‘no growth’ movement faces today and is inseparable from the environmental problem of a world filling up with people” (Stone 175-79). Stone is defending Forster’s hedging as a reflection of an inevitable tension between humans and nature; but what Stone’s assessment fails to recognize is that this conflict is not experienced equally by all humans. The environmental cause continues to have an adversarial relationship with certain *kinds* of people, frequently getting mired in issues of class prejudice, privilege, and the displacement of native people in favor of the protection of wilderness areas for the benefit of a distant, upper-class, white majority. The environmental justice movement of the late twentieth century has striven to bring attention to the ways in which toxic waste is often dumped in the backyards of those who cannot afford homes overlooking scenic areas.⁸ Other ecocritics have begun to question preservation goals that work to the benefit of wealthy nations who used up their natural resources to get rich while continuing to deny economic opportunities to other nations.⁹ But the champions of

nature are still too often unaware of the economic privilege that enables their cause. Well-intentioned conservation efforts frequently perpetrate injustice against lower-classes, minorities, or residents of other countries that have not been as voraciously developed. Forster's awareness of the issue, as evidenced in his quandary over the working class and their desire for better suburban housing in "The Challenge of Our Time," indicates that even though he still wrestled with latent class prejudice, he was at least willing to bring this problem to the forefront of discussion.

Similarly, while his fiction betrays vibrations of deeper class prejudices—a form of the "goblins" that surface to threaten the pastoral symphony—Forster's texts just as frequently pluck out these problems and point them out for criticism. As in "The Story of a Panic" and "The Other Kingdom," the glib, narrow-minded English persona is often satirized in the form of a narrator that Forster cleverly sets up for ridicule; therefore, the moments where the narrators of *Howards End* and *Maurice* seem to fuse with the author himself may be regarded as instances of self-deprecation and self-parody. Forster consistently monitors his own deficiencies as well as society's shortfalls. The rural value that nature is supposed to teach a greedy human species is that care is necessary towards all because everyone is interconnected: "Connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers" (*Howards End* 281). While the abundant harvest and union of families in *Howards End* portends that this connection may be possible, Leonard's death, much like the "creeping" city Margaret observes in the distance, should unsettle the reader. Forster's jubilant final register in the midst of these harbingers draws attention to the

depravity of civilized “progress” and intimates the unattainability of satisfying solutions to the problems of human solipsism and industrialization in modern culture.

Forster’s idyllic pastoral conclusions should be read as part of the anti-pastoral effect of *Howards End* and *Maurice*. As Peppis explains, “most of Forster’s literary works can be understood as national allegories that diagnose an ailing nation and offer literary cures for the malaise they anatomize” (47). The cures are “literary” because, as Peppis elaborates, “Forster uses [. . .] tools of melodrama and unexpectedly shifts generic gears, swerving between comedy, romance, and tragedy to maximize the likelihood of transforming readers” (51). The pastoral is another critical genre for creating dramatic shifts in mood. Forster’s texts present ethereal, fantastical escapes that should prompt dissatisfaction in the reader. *Maurice*’s seemingly abrupt closure as the protagonists retreat to the greenwood, like the exiles “hiding in the mists and ferns” in “The Machine Stops” and the complicated pastoral gesture of *Howards End*, is another way of pointing out the solutions that English society seems incapable of achieving in the real world. In order to recognize the plight of others and live in a fully embodied way, one must cultivate an awareness that is based in the physical world and its organic processes. A Forsterian salvation from decayed urbanity is not a facile paradise; it exacts a heavy toll. Forster’s natural world admits hardship, yet, as Margaret Schlegel ruminates: “Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men” (113).

Beyond the Pastoral: *A Passage to India*

An ecophenomenological reading of *A Passage to India* reveals that the non-human realm is represented as the primary player in the novel's politics, but it has usually been analyzed in the context of post-colonialism. Post-colonial criticism has focused primarily on how race and gender inflect Forster's vision of empire, while Forster's primary "other," the landscape of India itself, has been overlooked; or, if acknowledged, it has been relegated to the enigma of the Marabar caves.¹⁰ However, in *A Passage to India*, nature trumps imperial politics and exposes the hypocrisy of humanism. It antagonizes superficial efforts at uniting British, Indian, Muslim, and Hindu, reminding the reader that amity can only be achieved through an acceptance of unexpected meanings and inclusion of radically divergent forms of life.

Although the caves have been widely interpreted, most keenly by Benita Parry, the caves themselves are secondary to Forster's depiction of India as an entire environmental system. Indeed, Forster's representation of landscape and non-human life is the pre-eminent experience of *A Passage to India*. Although critics have generally focused on the text's relationship to liberal humanism,¹¹ the physical landscape of India has a potent agency in the novel that belies a simple anthropomorphic humanism. Edward Said's well-known critical assessment that *A Passage to India* is "at a loss" because the novel form exposes "difficulties [Forster] cannot deal with" and "a locale frequently described as unapprehendable and too large" (201) doesn't account for the ways in which the novel's acknowledgment of India's forceful agency and the environment's power to resist human control is a major component of the novel's

successful critique of both Eurocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of authority. Environmental forces influence the direction of the plot and play a key role in the novel's complex resolution. Subsequently, Forster's alleged pre-occupation with humanist values and the common identification of the story's "other" as native Indians glosses over the post-human potential of Forster's text where the non-human is the primary "other."¹² Forster's India exerts a palpable presence embodied by heat and terrain. Moreover, it is endowed with the speech of its "hundred voices" (362), including the central echo that communicates itself in a non-human language acquiring different valences of meaning as it radiates through the novel.

Ecophenomenology provides a rubric for understanding the non-human presence in *A Passage to India*, offering new perspectives on some of the more baffling or inscrutable moments in the novel, and illuminating modernist aspects of Forster's writing techniques.¹³ Specifically, Forster's emphasis on non-human subjectivity exhibits new methods of representing interiority, while his attention to the organic potential of language to change and gain a multiplicity of meaning as it is used, shared, and thereby transformed typifies a modern experimentation with language at the level of the word. Forster acknowledges the novel strives towards a philosophical goal of embodiment: "It's about something wider than politics, about the search of the human race for a more-lasting home, about the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky . . . It is, or rather desires to be—philosophic and poetic" ("Three Countries" 298). Whether or not Forster consciously intended to make a statement about politics, his use of the environment reveals a critical approach to England's efforts to control India and

humanity's desire to subjugate and classify nature. The physical interplay between human and non-human life resists the hierarchical rationalism of empire.¹⁴ Yet, Forster's homage to the supremacy of nature's power proposes a vision of future reconciliation that is also more than political: a future transformed by an enlightened understanding of forces other than those of empire—connections and interdependencies that transcend individual desire or even nationhood.

India's landscape is imbued with a tactile physicality. The sky is omnipotent over humankind and vivifies the body of earth below:

The sky settles everything—not only climate and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful. By herself she can do little—only feeble outbursts of flowers. But when the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon. The sky can do this because it is so strong and enormous. Strength comes from the sun, infused in it daily; size from the prostrate earth. No mountains infringe on the curve. League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves. (5-6)

The “climate and seasons” dictate the action of the novel. Heat and fatigue play a role at the Marabar caves, in the departure and death of Mrs. Moore, the tense atmosphere of the trial, and the redemptive celebration of rain and fecundity in the final chapter. The prodigious power of the sky eclipses human efforts to control action. Moreover, the land's power is a dynamic living force, a nascent body that “lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again” in an image of inhalation and exhalation. The earth rests “prostrate” with “fists and fingers [. . .] thrust up,” perhaps in a violent gesture of defiance against simple, superficial human attempts to see what is picturesque without comprehending larger patterns of meaning, or perhaps the embodiment of the force that reaches out in an effort

to grip Adela as she tours the caves. While this description employs components of personification, notably in the “fists and fingers” of the hills, Forster ultimately composes a landscape that retains a distinctly non-human sentience. As the episode at the caves will corroborate, the “voice” of India does not emulate human speech; it communicates in forms dissonant to human verbal logic. The environment disturbs human characters and challenges the reader to make sense of it. Forster’s resistance to depicting humans in a romantic-oneness with nature alludes to the fallacy of empathy that doesn’t respect and acknowledge difference.

Forster doesn’t merely overlay the land with human traits; he also shades his human characters with non-human attributes, complicating simple personification with the “zoo-ification” or “terra-ification” of humans. This strategy disrupts the idea that the human is always the comparative standard. Just as the landscape is rendered as a bodily presence, human bodies are also transfigured as landscape. After Adela’s flight from the caves, she becomes ill: “She had been touched by the sun, also hundreds of cactus spines had to be picked out of her flesh” and the doctor was “always coming on fresh colonies [. . .] She lay passive beneath their fingers, which developed the shock that had begun in the cave. [. . .] Everything now was transferred to the surface of her body, which began to avenge itself, and feed unhealthily” (214). Her body becomes a territory to be explored, where “colonies” are identified and brought under the control of western medicine. The “fingers” she lays “passive” beneath rhetorically recall the “cave” mentioned in the same sentence, fusing body and geography so that “everything” concerning the shock of her experience is mapped onto the surface of her body. The

human body becomes a topographical territory dissolving the divisions between corporal flesh and physical terrain. Forster's formal inversion not only refuses to make humans the basis for all other non-human comparison but also represents the complex and reflexive interactions between humans and the environment.

The intercorporeality of human and environment is known in ecophenomenology as "the flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 144)—a recognition of the reflexive interchange between an individual's tactile experience and the reciprocal sensory reaction of surrounding forces and objects that form the basis of humans ability to know themselves within the world. *A Passage to India* is replete with images reinforcing the bodily interaction between humans and the impress of the world's "flesh": "The space between them and their carriages, instead of being empty, was clogged with a medium that pressed against their flesh" (123); "If the flesh of the sun's flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills" (136); "The sun rose [. . .] touching the bodies already at work in the fields" (152). These examples of the open boundaries of the body of things heighten awareness of an interconnected whole; the mutation of ecological boundaries described in the opening pages of the novel, the meeting of races and cultures, the vibrant mesh of pulsating non-human life all overlap and affect each other.

The novel's emphasis on physicality extends beyond conventional humanism to encourage esteem for all forms of life, both human and non-human. Forster gives voice to the "pain that is endured not only by men, but by animals and plants, and perhaps by the stones" (275). As David Abram explains, the concordance of humans with other life

forms a foundational tenet of ecocriticism: “Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth’s animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence” (Abram 152). Acknowledging animals as equal members of the natural world makes them an indispensable “other” that must be incorporated into human life in order to fully invigorate humanity’s own intelligence. Forster’s belief that human forms of order and assumption must be disrupted is concisely communicated in an entry from his *Commonplace Book*: “‘Give me Permanency!’ says Man. And limits his intelligence by the request” (1929). The abundance of animal life in *A Passage to India*—including alligators, snakes, birds, squirrels, flies, beetles, leopards, horses, and most significantly, wasps—adds another dimension of perspective illuminating how difference stimulates alternate forms of knowledge. Forster’s use of the non-human resists simple anthropomorphism, which relegates animals to an inert mirror for human thought. Instead, non-human representations maintain an aspect of “otherness” of which the human characters remain ignorant—offering alternate insights to relationships of power throughout the text.

The non-verbal voices of the animals exemplify Forster’s creation of a non-anthropocentric, non-human life consistently asserting itself as one of India’s “hundred voices” (362). In one instance, as the squirrels occupy surrounding houses, a non-human language is intimated: “the squeals it gave were in tune with the infinite, no doubt, but not attractive except to other squirrels [. . .] More noises came from a dusty tree [. . .] another bird, the invisible coppersmith, had started his ‘ponk ponk’” (123). The

squirrel's high-pitched "squeals" and the bird's "ponk" are not translated into language, nor are they necessarily harmonious to other ears, even though they are acknowledged as fellow-beings, also part of some larger "infinite" tune. Once this distance between human and non-human is established, Forster imagines that their ways of thinking might also contradict human assumptions: "Most of the inhabitants of India do not mind how India is governed [. . .] the inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control as soon as men are tired" (123). The non-human does not serve the purposes of men in Forster's text; rather he privileges nature's power to vanquish all claims to human superiority. The expansive scale of environmental force diminishes political measures of control; power operates according to the dimensions of long-term natural history instead of the spasmodic timetables of national interests. Forster gestures toward a non-human dominion greater and more permanent than any political empire.

The wasp—an animal usually deigned to have little impact in the human world, but which is also capable of causing harm—is one of the most memorable instances of animal life in the novel and typifies Forster's ability to intermingle subjectivity and physicality while subtly critiquing empire. Early in the novel, Mrs. Moore finds a wasp resting on a peg where she had intended to hang her cloak. She chooses not to remove it, treating it with kindness, and calling it "pretty dear" (34). The encounter draws attention to the insistent presence of the non-human world but also shows how human relationships with the non-human lend new insight to relations between humans. The dormant wasp could represent the slumbering potential for violence in British and Indian relations. Although the wasp "did not wake," Mrs. Moore's "voice floated out, to swell the night's

uneasiness” (34) as if her graciousness is not enough to prevent the impending swollen sting of colonial unrest. Simultaneously, the wasp serves as a reminder of nature’s larger kingdom, carrying on without regard to human social structures. In fact, the wasp’s disregard for human distinctions between the outdoors and built interiors indicates a certain mastery over human endeavors: “it is to [the wasps] a normal outgrowth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses trees” (34). Despite human activity and “advancement,” the jungle is “eternal” and its animals still lay claim to its natural or reinvented territories. The doubling of “houses trees, houses trees” conflates the similarity by repetition; further, the comma separates not the individual words, but rather the word pairs, emphasizing “houses trees” as a singular noun or concept with one meaning that defies distinctions between built and natural places. The wasp’s presence in the house as well as the tree contradicts the human belief, particularly British, in the stability of constructed boundaries and divisions, whether between Indians and British or humans and animals.

The episode at the Marabar caves illustrates the general ineffectiveness of logic to make sense of the multiplicity of India’s non-human meanings. The caves are described in terms of absence throughout the text: “There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else in the world” (136). Notably, even Godbole, the character whose Hindu beliefs give him the perspective most aware of the non-human world, whose “whole appearance suggested harmony—as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical” (77), has difficulty finding words to describe the Marabar caves.¹⁵ When asked about the cave’s attractions, holy

significance, or ornamentation, he replies “Oh no” (80) to any efforts to particularize their appeal. Some critics interpret such terms of absence as a literal expression of negation, or a sinister void that “insidiously denies all meaning” (Medalie 134).¹⁶ However, Benita Parry explicates the caves in terms of their “affirmative resonances” by pointing out the “circumlocutions of the opening paragraph” and Godbole’s lines “Yet absence implies presence, absence is not a non-existence” (198). She acknowledges that the inarticulability is based on a confounding multiplicity of meaning rather than its absence. Similarly, Godbole doesn’t need to identify a single culprit in the Marabar caves, but understands the presence of good and evil as a concordance of a larger agency shared by all: “‘It was performed by the guide.’ He stopped again. ‘It was performed by you.’ [. . .] ‘It was performed by me.’ [. . .] ‘And by my students. It was even performed by the lady herself. When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs’” (197). Acts of good and evil are “performed” by an individual yet concurrently implicated in the larger flesh of the world. Godbole’s explanation assumes an integrated system of cause and effect where each act coalesces with others in a kinetic and ecological expression of the health of the organic whole. Thus, to expound upon Parry’s analysis, describing the caves in terms of absence actually signifies an “affirmative” embedded potential. The communication of a more-than-human or other-than-human realm may thwart verbal meaning but doesn’t indicate “nothing.” Instead, it denotes the presence of a larger sensory world that cannot be contained by human language: “‘Boum’ is the sound *as far as the human alphabet can express it*, or ‘bou-oum,’ or ‘ou-boum’” (163, emphasis added). The echo is the utterance of the cave

itself, created by the physical, tactile interaction of humans and stone, flame, shadows, and the press of unseen flesh.

The echo of the Marabar caves resonates with multiple valences of subjective human experience, non-human or pre-linguistic communication, and alternate forms of knowledge. Mrs. Moore and Adela both leave with the echo still reverberating within their auditory senses—trapped inside the caverns of their own heads and bodies. As Mrs. Moore realizes after her experience, the sound of the echo encompasses many messages: “it had managed to murmur, ‘Pathos, piety, courage—they exist but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value” (165). Mrs. Moore interprets these murmurs as a reduction of value, but they also have the potential to magnify value. The qualities Mrs. Moore lists, “pathos, piety, courage,” are attributes mired in Adela’s false accusation of Aziz—her yearning for a sympathetic emotional bond with Ronny, her faithfulness to her own race, the community’s belief in her courage—but they are also prognosticators of her ultimate acquittal of Aziz too—her compassion for his predicament, her piety towards her moral obligations to truth, and as Fielding attests, her courage in admitting her mistake. Similarly, “everything exists, nothing has value” has both negative and positive potential—it can articulate a nullifying reduction or an enlarged understanding of value, bolstering Godbole’s claims that “nothing” does indeed *have* “value.” Adela hears the echo resound in her head during a conversation with Mrs. Moore and thinks that Mrs. Moore has told her Aziz is innocent (226-27). Although Mrs. Moore didn’t actually verbalize this thought, she later confirms this conviction, suggesting the echo mediated a universal or more-than-human thought between the two

women. Such non-human subjectivity pushes modernist concerns for interiority in new directions. The echo, compounded with concerns of subjectivity and the complexity of representing the flow of internal thought evidences Forster's experimentation with modern preoccupations. Like other modernists, he represents internal subjective thought, but expands it beyond the consciousness of a single character to include the consciousness shared between humans and non-humans.

Forster's methods of representing physical encounters with place and non-human are illuminated by the precepts of ecophenomenology. Ecophenomenology presumes an attitude of open-minded questioning on the part of the perceiving human:

The effective, present, ultimate and primary being[s], the thing[s] [themselves] [. . .] offer themselves only to someone who wishes not to have them but [. . .] giv[es] them the free space they ask for in return [. . .] [They are] not a nothingness the full being would come to stop up, but a question consonant with a porous being which it questions and from which it receives not an answer, but a confirmation of its astonishment. It is necessary to comprehend perception in this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it, before which the things form and undo themselves in a sort of gliding, beneath the yes and the no. (Merleau-Ponty *Visible* 102).

The formulation of meaning in non-human interactions comes when humans approach the encounter with the expectation of being taught something themselves—"to someone who wishes not to have them but [. . .] giving them the free space they ask for in return." This attitude is akin to the difference between Adela's desire to know the "real" India on her own terms and Godbole's religious dance wherein he lets the world speak to him: "scraps of their past, tiny splinters of detail emerged for a moment to melt into the universal warmth [. . .] Chance brought [Mrs. Moore and the wasp] into his mind, he did not select [them] [. . .] How can [an event] be expressed in anything but itself?"

(323). Letting the “other” speak for itself may necessitate confusion and uncertainty, but ultimately, the effort is more genuine.

The novel suggests that a more truthful relationship with the world requires acceptance of fluidity and uncertainty. Simply because the experience resists verbal description does not mean it is a “nothingness” humans must “come to stop up”; it is “a porous being which it questions and from which it receives not an answer, but a confirmation of astonishment.” The ability to know oneself in relation to other ecological and non-human life defies clear delineations; the relationship between human self and non-human “other” isn’t a binary to be solved by “yes” or “no.” A more truthful relationship with the world requires a recognition of fluidity and an acceptance of uncertainty. Only when one recognizes the fracturing process of history and ecology as a means by which progress advances by “form[ing] and undo[ing]” can the gaps of difference be understood as spaces of potential. The landscape of Forster’s India eludes any picturesque notions of it. Representing streaming thought as well as exposing the limits of Victorian notions of faith and selfhood are primary concerns of modernists; Forster embraces such modernist practices as part of a realm of unknown potential, rather than a frightening void.

The dialectic of positive and negative potential is seen in Forster’s depiction of the non-linguistic auditory experience of the caves. References to the cave and its echo continue to resurface, gliding between a premonition of evil and a nagging reminder of Aziz’s innocence. Adela’s conception of the Marabar caves undergoes a tremendous transformation from her initial reaction to her visualization of the episode at trial: “the

double relation gave it indescribable splendour. Why had she thought the expedition ‘dull’?” (253). The emphasis on cleaving oppositions, with potential left floating somewhere between the two proposed rifts of possibility reoccurs throughout the novel: Mrs Moore exclaims of the Ganges, “What a terrible river! What a wonderful river!” (31); Aziz’s servant’s failure to respond to Aziz’s request is described as “Heard and didn’t hear, just as Aziz called and didn’t call” (108); Godbole explains his expectation of God’s answer to prayer as “Oh yes. Oh no, I do not expect an answer to my question now” (195); Mrs. Moore remarks about herself, “I am not good, no, bad” (228); God is construed “He is, was not, is not, was” (317). Like Merleau-Ponty’s theory, the text does not resolve these straining oppositions. Instead it opens up both possibilities, leaving the reader to shuttle between them, “gliding, beneath the yes and the no” so that the tension of Indian relations, both human and non-human, remains always an uncompleted gesture. Akin to the binaries of “yes” and “no,” the novel beats against the rhythm of question and answer in unexpected ways. Place symbolizes both question and answer: The arches of Fielding’s house are “the architecture of Question and Answer” hinting that India embodies in its very structure the continuing rhythm of interrogation and response. Similarly, Adela’s legal interrogation is imagined in spatial terms: “The court, the place of question awaited her reply. But she could not give it until Aziz entered the place of answer” (254). Ironically, the names “Quested” and “Aziz” may even suggest that the person of Miss Quested is the Question that must be answered by the person of Aziz. To extend the simile, “Aziz” may be interpreted as the response “as is,” signifying that the quest to know India must finally be a quest to understand something as it is, not as one

might want it to be. The dilemma Miss Quested presents and Aziz's response to her maltreatment again pose the question and answer of the state of India's affairs and the future potential for equality between the races. Thus, Forster effortlessly slides the lexicon of "yes" and "no," "question" and "answer" through the permeable boundaries of places and bodies, breaking convention in new and unexpected ways.

Patterns, repetitions, and cycles, what Forster calls "rhythm" in *Aspects of the Novel*, provide the unifying formal undercurrent of the text. These patterns are intertwined with cycles of seasonal fluctuation and the necessity of death to propel new creation. The Ganges is both a symbol of holy life and a conduit for death. At the same time Mrs. Moore notes the "radiance" it participates in creating, she learns about the dead bodies released into its current and consumed by crocodiles, which Forster echoes when her own body is relinquished into another body of water, the Indian Ocean. The spiritual significance of the Ganges can't be divorced from the physical reality of the ecological system. Similarly, the water that flows throughout Chandrapore in a built system of tanks circulates through buildings and people like blood pumping through the valves of a heart: "A sudden sense of unity [. . .] passed into the old woman and out, like water through a tank" (28). And when the rains come after the stifling temperatures culminating in the heat of the trial, Aziz notes the change of season as a change in emotion that it would have pleased him to share with Mrs. Moore: "How I wish she could have seen them, our rains. Now is the time when all things are happy [. . .] the tanks are so full they dance, and this is India. [. . .] Was the cycle beginning again? His heart was too full to draw back" (350). His heart, like the tanks, is racing and pulsating with energy and life; yet

Aziz also recognizes the cycle of the seasons must twine with the cycles of life itself so that the disappointments of friendship or love and even the possibility of injustice and violence are always elements of the mixture which must resurface in time.

Forster's India insists upon change and fluidity in defiance of human desires for clear political hierarchies or cultural unity. The human desire for constant harmony is unnatural: "Fish manage better; fish, as the tanks dry, wriggle into the mud and wait for the rains to uncake them. But men try to be harmonious all the year round, and the results are occasionally disastrous" (234). The ecological system that creates meaning in India relies on the interdependency of what humans often consider "negative" or "bad," but which actually contributes indispensably to the natural working order: "The signs of the contented Indian evening multiplied; frogs on all sides, cow-dung burning eternally; a flock of belated hornbills overhead [. . .] There was death in the air, but not sadness" (344). Thus, the presence of inevitable death and decay is folded into the process of constructive life. There is no singular, comforting identity; India thrives on its cyclical nature and its multiplicity. Difference creates a thriving whole: "The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite: Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans, *which radiate and join*, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached" (327-28, emphasis added). The variety of cultures and people creates the beauty—radiating filaments that join the multi-hued pattern. The landscape mirrors the same sense of abundant variety: "the sister kingdoms of the north [. . .] stretched out their hands and sang as [Aziz] sang [. . .] and greeted ridiculous Chandrapore, where every street and house was divided against itself, and told her that

she was a continent and a unity” (114). The context of relationships between landmasses creates new commonalities unique to Chandrapore. Subsequently, Chandrapore is part of a network of boundaries that unite into a continent containing the diverse ecotones and cultures of India.

The novel’s most humanist character, Fielding, unlike Forster himself, remains confined by the limitations of his fidelity to the classic forms of antiquity and rational paradigms that sabotage his ability to appreciate India’s divergent patterns of meaning. Fielding is arguably the character most sympathetic with the plight of the natives under colonial rule. His ease at hosting Indians in his home, his defense of Aziz during the trial, and his intimate friendship with Aziz set Fielding apart from other English characters. His deportment implies an equalizing personal philosophy and links him with favorable aspects of the humanist tradition. Consequently, that Fielding is still constricted by his own European modes of thinking bolsters the argument that Forster’s novel expresses more than simple liberal humanism. Fielding’s adherence to traditional forms hinders greater understanding: “The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong” (313). Fielding’s classical eye craves balanced, easily defined patterns; he fails to appreciate the divergent dissonance of India’s patterns, patterns Forster emulates in his use of changing repetitive phrases and echoes that advance cyclically rather than linearly.

Forster’s non-fiction account of his time in India, *The Hill of Devi*, is replete with descriptions that seem to have inspired the perception of place that he creates in *A*

Passage to India, beginning with a deprecatory mention of “stone steps [that] led up to the dark cave of Chamunda on top” but “nothing detained the tourist there and the surrounding domain was equally unspectacular. No antiquities, no picturesque scenery, no large rivers or mountains or forests, no large wild animals” (47-48). What is “lacking” is defined by the standards of the English picturesque, a narrow gaze that Forster abandons as his appreciation of the country deepens and he recognizes: “The frivolity, the triviality goes on, and every now and then it cracks, as at our festival, and discloses depths. ‘What am I, cries the poet, ‘invested with a body of seven spans in a small part of this egg the world? [. . .] When the festival was over one was left with something inexplicable, which grows a little clearer with the passage of years” (117). Suggestive of Godbole’s ambiguous epiphanies during the Hindu Birth Ceremony, the “cracks” and fissures are what provide the opportunity for insight that can only be apprehended with the passage between places and through time. As John Marx has recently noted, “imperial representation appears so discordant in *A Passage to India*: unsettling desires destabilize the carefully composed surface of the imperial picturesque, making that Victorian landscape disorderly and strange” (113). Forster privileges a more eclectic aesthetic of organicity, suggesting that the very absence of European expectations of “beauty” and proper order in a landscape are superficially deficient when compared to the wild proliferating diversity of India’s terrain. As in *Maurice*, Forster’s sexuality may have given him a personal stake in unsettling categories of what is “natural” or “proper” and what English values deem “unnatural” when writing *A Passage to India*. Stuart Christie has gone so far as to posit that the “unnamable” sensations

provoked by an encounter with India constitute “the emergence of the obscene writing on the colonial text” to assert the latent presence of the homosexual “other” (173). While the exact role of sexual identity in the landscape is elusive, Christie’s theory comports with the text’s more overt goal of undermining assumptions of English superiority over the unknown and multifarious forces of nature. While gazing at the Marabar Hills from the Club veranda Fielding experiences a fleeting notion that we exist “not only for ourselves” (277) but in terms of each other. This insight grasps at Forster’s famous motto from *Howard’s End*—“only connect.” However, in *A Passage to India* understanding and community doesn’t hinge on a humanist connection between humans of different classes and nationalities; instead, the theme of reaching beyond oneself implicates the tenuous living filaments that connect and sustain a diverse range of living beings operating within a wider world largely ignored by humans.

From any individual human perspective, India’s diversity doesn’t reveal its larger patterns or holistic purpose. As Mrs Moore prepares to leave, she begins to see other faces of India and worries whether she has seen “the right” places. But the land belies any singular human attempt to define it: ““So you thought an echo was India; you took the Marabar caves as final’ [the palm trees] laughed. ‘What have we in common with them, or they with Asirgarh?’” (233). The essence of a working organic system cannot be reduced to a single unit, just as the British colonies resisted homogeneous amalgamation to British culture. A healthy living system requires a web of diverse relationships—relationships that may not cohere from any individual perspective. When Godbole calls for the gods to “come, come, come,” he receives a vision of the wasp and

Mrs. Moore. His reaction expresses the frustration of unknowability: “This was all he could do. How inadequate!” (326). But within himself he knows that the reach from one living being to others must provide meaning: ““It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself”” (326). Yet the reader who experiences what just one character is unable to know, can begin to understand the potential connections between the seemingly disparate images of Godbole dancing to the gods amidst a motley assortment of sparkling oddities, and the figure of Mrs. Moore who has reached out to the wasp and offered it graciousness. This divergent pastiche is a pattern of repeated possibilities of hope and empathy.

Just as an ecological system thrives on diversity, the ending of *A Passage to India* does not simplify and eradicate differences in race and culture, whether they are between English and Anglo-English, Anglo-Indian and Indian, Muslim and Hindu, or human and non-human. *A Passage to India* manifests an inter-dependent system of relationships where the friction between races, cultures, and religions generates new possibilities for each and enlivens the multiplicity of cross-cultural meanings. Aziz and Fielding are denied an easy conciliatory embrace by the intervening non-human world: “But the horses didn’t want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; [. . .] the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view: they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there’” (362). It is not coincidental that the ubiquitous sky gets the final word. Further, the message, like other echoes, is not a complete

negation; the animals, earth, and sky merely state that the season for such amity has not yet arrived.

Two earlier enactments of this same denial reinforce the promise of attachment not only between the two cultures, but also between humans and the “other” of the non-human world. In the first anticipatory invocation of the novel’s conclusion Aziz tells Mrs. Moore’s son, ““But you are Heaslop’s brother also, and alas, the two nations cannot be friends.”” Ralph replies, ““I know. Not yet.”” But with a “swerve of voice and body that Aziz did not follow he added, ‘In her letters, in her letters, She loved you’” (349-50). Not only does this moment anticipate the ending and the “swerve” of the two horses, it also emphasizes the layers of relationships and the various modes of communicating love. Aziz’s initial romantic notion of Mrs. Moore is finally fulfilled. Even though it is doubtful she ever truly understood Aziz, the vision of her love and her secret understanding of his heart is somehow translated by her son to fruition. The bond of empathy is still possible—unexpected, misunderstood, but vital to the completion of the whole.

Yet the constitutive element suffusing the final “passages” of the novel with cohesive meaning is found in the ecological climax of the emblems of human Hindu ritual with the forces of nature. The moment before Aziz first recognizes the “small black blot” as the House Boat paddling out into the river, Forster describes the sky mirrored in the water of the Mau tank: “Reflecting the evening clouds, it filled the netherworld with an equal splendour, so that earth and sky leant toward one another, about to clash in ecstasy” (343). The two entities reaching out towards each other in an

ecstatic union prefigures Aziz and Fielding precipitously rushing towards an intimate and suggestively sexual embrace. But the “about” suspends the union of cloud and sky as Aziz and Fielding were averted from joining. Moreover, the device of reflection allows Forster initially to present union as an illusion impossible to accomplish in reality. But Forster inverts the expectation—sky and earth may not meet in the lyrical, abstractly beautiful vision of the tank, but they do meet through the inconvenient burst of condensation into rain soaking the earth in a covertly sexual downpour. As Aziz and Ralph’s boat crashes into the boat containing Fielding and his wife, Mrs. Moore’s daughter, Stella, “shrank into her husband’s arms, then flung herself against Aziz” (354) capsizing the entire party into the river with everything else lightning and thunder “cracked like a mallet on the dome” (354) in a scene of unexpected physical embrace accompanied by echoing references of courtly “mallets” and cave-like “domes.” All is coalesced in both body and language. The accomplishment of final ecstasy of union is expressed by the dramatic pent up release of lightning and thunder: “That was the climax, as far as India admits of one. The rain settled in steadily to its job of wetting every-body and everything through” carrying out the sexual analogy.

The non-human energies attain a union cemented not in cohesiveness but in the very wild fertility of unexpected and illogical chaos. Prior to the apocalyptic fusion, a beautiful woman descends into the sacred waters “praising God without attributes—thus did she apprehend him [. . .] seeing Him in this or that organ of the body or manifestation of sky” (352). There is a lack of specificity, a confusing clutter of referents, but both human and non-human components create the “apprehen[sion]” of

sought-after meaning. The rain, like the other earthly elements of horses, rocks, and sky that rise up to prevent Aziz and Fielding's embrace, interrupts the proceedings of the ceremony: "a wild tempest started [. . .] Gusts of wind mixed darkness and light, sheets of rain cut from the north, stopped, cut from the south, began rising from below" (353). The drenching water accomplishes the blending of "darkness and light" another binary like "yes" and "no," "question" and "answer," but also connoting the combination of "dark" toned Indians and "light" skinned Britians. The geographical references are fractured and shifted from "north" and "south," above and "below" stressing the melding of all countries and all boundaries. Symbols of the festival are tossed into the river in a combination of forces that includes both the human agency of the participants and the driving strength of the storm: "baskets of ten-day corn, tiny tazias after Mohurram—scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage; a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable" (353). "Not now, not here" is mimicked by the later command "No, not yet [. . .] "No, not there" (362). But in the passage quoted above "not now, not here" is given added meaning by "not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable." The very gulf between the emblematic gesture and the true attainment of understanding makes apparent the truth of what is professed to be accomplished by the gesture.

If the gesture or emblem was readily completed and consecrated it would not have as much worth, deflating the value of the ideal it professes to symbolize. Therefore, the "unattainab[ility]" of the representative gesture allows us to fully "apprehend" the larger significance of the goal, whether it be the true understanding between cultures that will

sustain lasting relationships, or the search for affirmation that humans are indeed included in a larger system of meaning, a living ecology joining both humans and non-human “others” in a meaningful whole. The embrace between Aziz and Fielding is postponed because it emblemizes a greater understanding yet to be truly attained and practiced between Fielding and Aziz, Indian and Britain, human and non-human.

Just as the corn, tazias, and husks are representational “emblems of a passage; a passage not easy” (353), *A Passage to India* is a challenging artistic and symbolic representation of a more universal voyage to unknown territories, a voyage controlled not by the intentions of human ritual, whether they are religious, political, or personal, but by realizations that extend beyond personal desires or quests for empire. In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster questions the traditional culmination of a story asking, “Cannot it grow? [. . .] Cannot it open out? Instead of standing above his work and controlling it, cannot the novelist throw himself into it and be carried along to some goal that he does not foresee?” (96-97). *A Passage to India* contains rhythms that express “not rounding off but opening up” (169) by opening up a broader recognition of non-human agency and human humility. As other modernists foretell the demise of stable structures of empire and religion, Forster points to other cohesive possibilities—unions arising not out of planned expectations for logical coalition, but out of amalgamations of primeval non-human forces, portending alliances beyond cultural and political understandings. An enlightened perception of civilization and community must also include the environmental “other” before it can be consummated. *A Passage to India* offers possibilities for resolution, but they are arbitrated by ecological components twining animals and humans together not as

one might expect, but in a moving jumble of confusion, a unique merger of its own form challenging us to see the gap we may yet reach across toward a better understanding of ourselves and the encompassing ecological world.

Notes

1. Although critics have different takes on Forster's humanism, disagreeing about whether it was subversive, what kind of humanist philosophy it draws upon, or whether Forster's work represents a growing rejection of it, most critics don't doubt that his values of "progress, collectivism, and humanitarianism" operate solely for human empathy and human advancement. For more on Forster and humanism, see Lionel Trilling's *E.M. Forster* (New York: New Directions, 1943), Frederick Crews' *E.M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962), Wilfred Stone's "E.M. Forster's Subversive Individualism" in *E.M. Forster: Centenary Revaluations*, Eds. Judith Scherer Herz and Robert K. Martin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 15-29, Michael Levenson's "Liberalism and Symbolism in *Howards End*" from his book *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 78-93, and David Medalie's *E.M. Forster's Modernism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
2. For a more detailed treatment of how Forster's themes justify categorizing him as a modernist writer see David Medalie's *E.M. Forster's Modernism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
3. Particularly, the treatment of Forster's pastoral assumes a stereotypical reference to leisure and ease more associated with later versions of the pastoral in Dominic Head's "Forster and the Short Story" from *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, Ed. David Bradshaw (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007) 77-91, John Colmer's chapter "Short Stories" in *E.M. Forster: The Personal Voice* (Boston: Routledge, 1975) 25-41, and Denis Godfey's "The Short Stories" in *E.M. Forster's Other Kingdom* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968) 9-19.
4. It is also interesting to note the similarity between the names of the shepherd boy in this Idyll, "Alexis" and Maurice's rustic lover, "Alec." The two boys are similar in that they are both under the control of another master and the beloved is urging them to come and live in the country, surviving together by farming, hunting, and herding.
5. The presence of thorns also links these stories with sex and the classic pastoral. In Theocritus' fifth Idyll the wound of a thorn in the hero's (Battus') foot suggests a crude reference to females and the wounding effects of passion: "Such a little wound, and

it masters a man of my size!” Crydon: “You shouldn’t go barefoot when you’re out on the hillside, Battus; this whole hillside’s covered with thorns and brambles, you know” (59). The image of the thorns reoccurs suggestively in “Albergo Empedocle” when Harold is describing his dream to Mildred: “He was holding back the brambles to prevent them from tearing her dress as he spoke. One of the thorns scratched him on the hand. ‘Yes, I loved better too,’ he continued, watching the little drops of blood swell out” (25). Adela’s more famous encounter with thorns as she flees from imagined rape in the Marabar caves similarly references thorns during an implied sexual encounter.

6. In a letter Forster published in the May 30, 1919 issue of *The Daily Herald*, he expresses his frustration with society’s failure to “wake up” and take notice of world events; he pinpoints this passivity as the tool governments exploit to speed the unquestioned centralization of world power. Specifically, he was appalled that the public was engrossed by the details of the first (unsuccessful) attempt of a flyer (Harry Hawker) to cross the Atlantic rather than the major political events that were occurring, including the Amritsar massacre in India, the full horrors of which had not yet been widely reported:

This planet is passing through the supreme crisis of its history. It is being decided whether we shall be governed openly, like a free people, or secretly as in the past. And how the cynics who govern us secretly must have gloated over the hysterics of last Tuesday! ‘There goes the mob!’ they must have thought; ‘just the same as ever after four years of suffering—indifferent to truth, incapable of thought, and keen only on trifles. As long as we arrange for an occasional Hawker to be shouted at and boomed in the newspapers we can manage them as easily as ever.’ (Forster, *Daily Herald* May 30, 1919)

7. Nicola Beauman notes that the trials happened when Forster was sixteen years of age and coincided with a trip to Italy. Beauman surmises that Morgan’s mother, Lily, decided to take this single vacation in the space of twenty-two years in order to avoid exposing her son to any prominent discussion of homosexuality, for fear that he would share his father’s homosexuality. (120-21).

8. This kind of NIMBY (“Not In My Backyard”) attitude is known as environmental racism, against which some environmental theorists and activists have written and mobilized. See Robert D. Bullard’s *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder: Westview P, 2000, and Luke W. Cole and Sheila P. Foster’s *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York UP, 2001.

9. Several international environmental theorists have catapulted this issue to prominence, including Vandana Shiva in *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. Boston: South End P, 1997, and Candace Slater in *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*. Berkeley: U California P, 2002.

10. Virginia Woolf's brief analysis of *A Passage to India* recognizes the significance of the novel's non-human presence:

We notice things, about the country especially, spontaneously, accidentally almost, as if we were actually there; and now it was the sparrows flying about the pictures that caught our eye, now the elephant with painted forehead, now the enormous but badly designed range of hills. The people too, particularly the Indians, have something of the same casual, inevitable quality. They are not perhaps quite so important as the land, but they are alive; they are sensitive. ("Novels of E.M. Forster 174)

Despite her seeming indifference to the formal purpose underlying Forster's non-human elements by describing them as "random," Woolf astutely identifies how the pervasive animal presences create verisimilitude and compel the reader's attention. Although she compares the Indians to the land in a manner that exoticizes them, Woolf points out that the "people" are "not perhaps quite so important as the land."

11. Frederick Crews argues that both *A Passage to India* and *Howard's End* are "consistent with [Forster's] version of liberalism, which we can identify as a narrow but by no means private current within the wider liberal tradition" (332). Edward Said conflates Forster's own perspective with the "liberal, humane espousal of Fielding's views" and thus aligns what he perceives as the novel's "loss" with Fielding's humanism: "he would have been a perfect hero in Forster's earlier fictions, but here he is defeated" (201-02). Lidan Lin grounds her entire premise that Forster's ultimate endeavor is to justify English rule over India on the assumption that "liberal humanism" is "Forster's informing ideology" (133).

12. Lidan Lin contrasts what she perceives to be Forster's validation of liberal humanism with the values of post-humanism; however, she defines the post-human "other" that must be integrated into the formation of the "self" as the colonized native Indians as opposed to the non-human "other" of India itself.

13. It is surprising that even Benita Parry, one of Forster's most perceptive critics, denies the novel's modernist traits: "Neither stylistically nor syntactically does *A Passage to India* display that 'constitutive sense of creation through rupture and crisis' which has been described as the vocation of an aesthetic modernism (176, quoting Calinescu 92). Instead, Parry aligns Forster with earlier realist writers: "*A Passage to India* uses the language of realism to chronicle a tragic-comedy of culture discord and political conflict" (178).

14. Lidan Lin does not address any of the textual examples put forth in this essay, yet claims: "Forster fails to interrogate the rationalism that, as the cornerstone of English character, has served to germinate and nourish imperialism in the course of history" (140). Although Sara Suleri's critical approach to Forster's rationality is not as blunt as

Lin's she also identifies Forster with a "Western project which represents India as an empty site that is bounded only by an aura of irrationality" (246) and locates what she argues is the novel's negative critique of India in terms of Forster's valorization of rationality: "India is ultimately reprehensible because it denies the fixity of an object that the narrative subject can pursue and penetrate" (248).

15. The Marabar caves and their echo are generally described in terms of their negativity. For Suleri the caves are "areas of empty experience" (249) and an "obliterating presence" (249) giving off an "obscene echo" (249). Benita Parry expounds on how the caves have been interpreted by other critics: "a hollow site which the narrative, parodying an act of rape, violently penetrates" (185).

16. Godbole's name "itself suggests the omnipresence of divinity in the pantheism of God joined with nature (bole/tree)" (Childs 194).

17. Simon Schama describes the historical link between Oak trees and nationalism in the eighteenth century, which coincides with the time when the oaks were being heavily deforested:

Repeated analogies were made between the character of the timber and the character of the nation. The "heart" of oak, the core of the tree, was its hardest and stoutest wood. (164)

The association with this timber and English strength was literal as well as literary since the success of the British sailing fleet benefited from the Oak's property of being particularly resistant to rot. (164).

CHAPTER III

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL WHOLE: VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf's innovative formal strategies create an awareness of multiple animate beings within thick, sensory layers of earthly flesh. E.M. Forster was one of the first scholars to note the significance of Woolf's use of embodied perception. In a lecture he gave only one year after she committed suicide in 1941, Forster pays tribute to her ability to depict a vibrant world:

Food with her was not a literary device put in to make the book seem real. She put it in because she smelt the flowers, because she heard Bach, because her senses were both exquisite and catholic, and were always bringing her first-hand news of the outside world. Our debt to her is in part this: she reminds us of the importance of sensation in an age which practices brutality and recommends ideals. (*Two Cheers* 252)

Woolf's sensory relation with the physical world resists violence and intellectual detachment. Forster also describes the experience of re-reading her work as a process of overwhelming organic inspiration: "She is like a plant which is supposed to grow in a well-prepared garden bed—the bed of esoteric literature—and then pushes up suckers all over the place, through the gravel of the front drive, and even through the flagstones of the kitchen yard" (*Two Cheers* 242). Here, Forster metaphorically aligns Woolf's writing with wild growth. Forster's assessment emphasizes the qualities of embodied perception and environmental awareness in her work, yet for years those attributes went largely unexamined by literary critics.

In recent decades, Woolf scholarship has shown a renewed interest in her representations of the natural world. Gillian Beer's book, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, is preeminent. Beer reminds readers of Woolf's interest in theories of evolution, pre-history, science, and physics—areas that directly impact her depiction of humans within a larger contiguous environment. Mark Hussey was one of the first to link Woolf with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in *The Singing of the Real World*. However, his use of ecophenomenology is more thematically suggestive than theoretically significant, and his project assumes that Woolf's primary responses to the world are fear and despair—a position my dissertation argues against. Louise Westling persuasively demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology elucidates Woolf's concern with the larger universe of human and non-human forces in her article, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World." I build on Westling's analysis by interrogating Woolf's work more broadly and emphasizing how Woolf's formal experimentation creates embodied representations, offering fresh readings of key texts. By reassessing the sensory aspects of her work—the same aspects that Forster celebrated in 1942—we complicate our understanding of how Woolf manipulates images of unconscious felt connection, environmental stimuli, and the surge of natural forces. The non-human environment is registered not merely as a source of terror, but also as a stimulating, liberating potential for change.

Woolf's personal diaries and non-fiction essays provide insight into her embodied renderings of the environment and its impact on her fiction. Woolf's autobiographical writings affirm how the larger natural world informs her self-identity and her literary

imagination. Her diaries are replete with keen observations about the weather, which plant species are in bloom, and the habits of local birds. These passages are often the most lyrical sections of the entries. As she notes whom she has seen during the day or what she has done, the prose is often perfunctory; it almost seems to be rushed out onto the page as a list of chores in comparison with the way she lingers over her natural observations. The distinction is apparent in an entry dated March 3, 1920:

Then there was Roger's speech at the Club and my first effort—5 minutes consecutive speaking—all very brilliant and opening the vista of the form of excitement not before glimpsed at. Dined with Nessa and Duncan in Soho. Saw the woman drop her glove. A happy ending. Eliot and Sydney dine—Sydney righting himself after our blow about Suffield—not without a grampus sigh or so—Then off to Monks—and here I should write large and bright about the SPRING. It has come. It has been with us over a fortnight. Never did a winter sleep more like an infant sucking its thumb. Daffodils all out; garden set with thick golden crocuses; snowdrops almost over; pear trees budding; birds in song; days like June with a touch of the sun—not merely a painted sky but a warm one. Now we've been to Kew. I assure you, this is the earliest and loveliest and most sustained spring I remember. Almond trees out. (*Dairy* Vol.II, 21).

The significance she awards “SPRING” in all capital letters makes it literally blossom out from the page. The profusion of adjectives and metaphors fully rounds out each image, suggesting her pleasure in this part of her daily experience. The final line is particularly sensual as the feel of the heat in a previous line, “not merely a painted sky but a warm one,” brings out the scent of almond blossoms, “Almond trees out.” These passages seem to have a direct correlation to the kinds of lush descriptions and sensory attention that distinguishes most of her literary work.

Indeed, some entries explicitly tie organic imagery to Woolf's conception of creativity: “What was I going to say? Something about the violent moods of my soul. How describe them, even with a waking mind? I think I grow more and more poetic.

Perhaps I restrained it, and now, like a plant in a pot, it begins to crack the earthenware. Often I feel the different aspects of life bursting the mind asunder” (*Diary II*:304, 6/21/24). The emotions she attempts to express through literary inspiration are likened to the wild growth of roots shattering the walls of decorative pots meant to neatly contain them. Similarly, Woolf was breaking free from Victorian prose by shattering old literary forms and by imagining a natural world that exists for its own sake, rather than merely to reflect a character’s internal emotions. A comparable analogy is at work when she criticizes Arnold Bennett’s prose in “Modern Fiction”: “There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there?” (147) The tight floorboards, like the pot that Woolf imagines breaking, suggests formal rigidity that must be loosened or broken. By contrast, Woolf’s prose insists on the kinds of gaps and crevices that let life seep in.

Aware that she is in dialogue with the natural environment and other non-human voices, Woolf’s writing leaves spaces of silence and questioning for those presences to be registered. She consistently values humans not as a superior species, but as a single component jostling in an undulating network of larger natural forces. Her openness to other forms of sentience indicates a willingness to listen and perceive with humility. Woolf’s recollection of another particular afternoon as a young girl at St. Ives exemplifies the animate quality she perceives in the surrounding environment, particularly the living, changing skin of the apples and the interrogative mode of many “other than human forces”:

The lemon-coloured leaves on the elm trees, the round apples glowing red in the orchard and the rustle of the leaves make me pause to think how

many other than human forces affect us. While I am writing this, the light changes; an apple becomes a vivid green. I respond—how? And then the little owl [makes] a chattering noise. Another response. (“A Sketch of the Past” 114-15)

Woolf writes “I respond—how?” as if the changing color of the apples was in itself a question posed by the natural surroundings. Ecophenomenology explains that essential knowledge of an object or being can’t be perceived by immobilizing the subject “as with forceps” (*Visible* 101) into a fixed meaning; instead, a more fundamental understanding of another being is only achieved by “someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return” (*Visible* 101). Woolf’s attitude “comprehend[s] perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it” (*Visible* 102). Rather than representing the world as a static background, or using it as a literary symbol, she depicts the environment as a dynamic, fully rounded character in its own right. Further, the “little owl” responds to nature’s question before Woolf can frame her own response; the non-human presence reacts independently from and even more quickly than the human narrator.

In her fiction, Woolf employs anthropomorphism, formal hybridity, shifting perspective, and fragmented language in order to emphasize the inter-related existence of humans and nature. Woolf’s interconnectedness is distinct from a nineteenth-century desire to become one with nature or transcend nature; non-human animals and the environment do not simply mirror human emotion in Woolf’s fiction. Instead, they are in a shared relationship; the non-human world is given a voice with which to speak back to humans, and criticize human actions and ideas.

Woolf and Merleau-Ponty envision the potential of language to represent embodied experience of a larger “whole” in similar ways. The words Merleau-Ponty claims most “closely convey the life of the whole” are not those with eloquently precise meanings, but rather the “brute,” “wild” words which “energetically open upon Being” and “make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin” (102). The parallel in Woolf’s work is unmistakable; she also claims that a work of art is not a creation of certain, single-minded solidity, but rather “a symmetry by means of infinite discords [. . .] some kind of whole made of shivering fragments” (*Passionate Apprentice* 393). Depictions of momentary experiences of belonging and wholeness in Woolf’s work are often associated with the non-human realm. In fact, in many instances, physical sensations of sound, light, birds, trees and waves are the agents that create the oscillating shivers of contraction and expansion between separateness and community.³

Woolf as a Green Reader

Woolf’s frequent and elaborate critical treatment of how nature is represented in the works of *other* authors offers useful signposts for understanding her own goal of rendering the natural world accurately and actively. Indeed, her analyses of other literary texts in the *Common Reader* essays resemble what one might now identify as ecocritical readings. In an essay titled “Outlines” Woolf spends several sentences discussing the variety of snow that one would have experienced in the 18th century, and remarks: “Sufficient attention has scarcely been paid to this aspect of literature, which, it cannot be denied, has its importance. Our brilliant young men might do worse, when in search of a

subject, than devote a year or two to cows in literature, snow in literature, the daisy in Chaucer and in Coventry Patmore” (184-85). Following her own suggestion, she pays heed in “The Pastons and Chaucer” to Chaucer’s ability to bring forth all of nature’s vagaries: “Nature, uncompromising, untamed, was no looking-glass for happy faces, or confessor of unhappy souls. She was herself; sometimes, therefore, disagreeable enough and plain, but always in Chaucer’s pages with the hardness and freshness of an actual presence” (13). Here she describes a kind of practice she seeks in her own fiction.

Similarly, describing what makes Tolstoy “the greatest of all novelists” (180) in “The Russian Viewpoint” she notes that he proceeds, “as we are accustomed to proceed, not from the inside outwards, but from the outside inwards” (181). In other words, environmental and physical stimuli prompt internal thought. Tolstoy uses nature to express the affinity of common experience, the way “we are accustomed to proceed.” By “we” here, Woolf not only refers to her audience of common readers but also modernist writers interested in recording daily experiences, as her fiction will also document. What Woolf finds interesting in Tolstoy is a sense of the embodied perception of ordinary experience. It is sparked by nudges received from the outside world of physical contact—a fire lit by the rub of sensation upon the flint of the mind. This kind of vivacity is particularly keen in the context of Tolstoy’s urban experiences of place:

He is metropolitan, not suburban. His senses, his intellect, are acute, powerful, and well nourished. There is something proud and superb in the attack of him. Nothing glances off him unrecorded. Nobody, therefore, can so convey the excitement of sport, the beauty of horses, and all the fierce desirability of the world to the senses of a strong young man. Every twig, every feather sticks to his magnet. (181)

Such attention to the sensory impact of the environment on the thoughts and actions of characters similarly manifests itself in Woolf's work.

The Second Common Reader is even more explicit in illustrating environmental distinctions Woolf considers important for distinguishing between outdated formal modes of writing and the modern method. Her essays on Philip Sidney and Thomas Hardy are particularly illuminating. In "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia" Woolf sympathizes with Sidney's lush prose: "Look, he seems to cry, as he picks up the glittering handfuls, can it be true that there are such numbers of beautiful words lying about for the asking? Why not use them lavishly, abundantly?" (35). This description still implies an immaturity; Sidney is like a child dazzled by the sparkles without the wisdom to use them sparingly to greatest artistic effect. What Woolf praises in Sidney's pastoral are those passages where he pauses for an ordinary thought in the midst of the ornately laden natural descriptions: "For a moment we get a surprising combination; crude daylight overpowers the silver lights of the tapers; shepherds and princesses suddenly stop their warbling and speak a few rapid words in their eager human voices [. . .] But that moment of illumination, as it dies down and the princes once more resume their postures, and the shepherds apply themselves to their lutes, throws a curious light upon the book as a whole" (36-37). Eventually, the modern reader tires of the courtly flourishes: "We have come to long for some plain statement, and the decoration of the style, at first so enchanting, has dulled and decayed" (39). Sidney, himself, found the project lacking and failed to finish it. Woolf uses a natural metaphor to explain the reader's encounter with the abandoned work: "It becomes one of those half-forgotten and deserted places where

the grasses grow over fallen statues and the rain drips and the marble steps are green with moss and vast weeds flourish in the flower-beds” (40). The rigid pastoral formula is left in ruins, but what grows up around it is almost more pleasing. As she will represent in the “Time Passes” section of the *To the Lighthouse*, nature’s power to decay man-made structures and produce a wild fecundity of its own is likened to a more positive imaginative potential. The unfinished quality of *Arcadia* allows room for modern thoughts to seed themselves into the text:

We can trace the infinite possibilities [. . .] Will it fix its gaze upon Greece and prince and princesses, and seek as it might so nobly, the statuesque, the impersonal? [. . .] Or will it brush through those barriers and penetrate within to the anguish and complexity of some unhappy woman loving where she may not love; to the senile absurdity of some old man tortured by an incongruous passion? Will it make its dwelling in their psychology and the adventures of the soul? (40-41)

What the modern reader can grow in the remains of Sidney’s florid art gets at the tangle of daily thought and ordinary experience—the kind of perceptions Woolf will prioritize through using stream of consciousness.

In contrast to her view of Sidney, Woolf admires in Hardy a mode that is closer to her own. Specifically, she praises the way Hardy’s work pulses with a living essence of the real world as it is experienced. In “The Novels of Hardy” she sees him as “a minute and skilled observer of nature; the rain, he knows, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable; he knows that the wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is aware, in a larger sense of Nature as a force” (223). As she did with Chaucer, Woolf commends Hardy’s representation of nature as an entity that is not mastered by humans. His emphasis on Nature refuses to mold itself into the contours of

classical pastoralism, which Woolf describes metaphorically as an “English landscape painter, whose pictures are all of cottage gardens and old peasant women” (223-24). Instead she distinguishes Hardy from the paint-by-numbers set, insisting, “And yet what kindly lover of antiquity, what naturalist with a microscope in his pocket, what scholar solicitous for the changing shapes of language, ever heard the cry of a small bird killed in the next wood by an owl with such intensity?” (224). What Woolf admires in Hardy goes beyond his deft language and his detailed knowledge of habitat and zoology. She reserves her most profound praise for his ability to evoke a feeling of sympathy with other creatures, a communal representation of anguish, grief, or pain that is shared across species.

Epiphanies of embodied perception are vital to engendering such empathy. Hardy’s own term for such flashes of inspiration in his work, “moments of vision” (224), have a similar ring with Woolf’s own interest in “moments of being” (“Sketch of the Past 70) Woolf’s term extends the emphasis on sight to a wider sensory experience; a more varied embodiment that she also found in Hardy’s fiction. Woolf expresses Hardy’s genius as “vivid to the eye, but not to the eye alone, for every sense participates, such scenes dawn upon us and their splendour remains” (225).

One of Woolf’s goals for modern fiction is to render an atmosphere that is charged with sensory stimulation more felt than understood. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty theorizes how unconscious embodied perception operates to imbue a sense of knowledge that can be shared and communicated, even if it can’t be clearly enunciated: “‘Private worlds’ [of separate individuals] communicate [. . .] The

communication makes us the witness of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing. But in both cases, the certitude, entirely irresistible as it may be, remains absolutely obscure; we can live it, we can neither think it nor formulate it nor set it up in theses. [. . .] It is just this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us” (*Visible* 11). Woolf’s pleasure in reading Hardy’s best scenes stems from a similar sensation: “there is always about them a little blur of unconsciousness, that halo of freshness and margin of the unexpressed which often produce the most profound sense of satisfaction” (“The Novels of Hardy” 225). In Woolf’s view, depicting an embodied attentiveness to surroundings and other sentient life forms is a pivotal component for representing the nebulous life force of modern fiction. As described in “Modern Fiction,” it is the idea that “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (15). Woolf’s fascination with nature and her enthusiasm for sensory renderings of the non-human in the work of other authors solicits a green reading of her own work.

Humans and Non-Human Animals in “Kew Gardens,” *Flush*, and “Thunder at Wembley”

In some of Woolf’s work, non-human animals assume key roles, with a status equivalent to their human counterparts. Thus Woolf implies their independent agency and a lateral, rather than hierarchical, relationship to the human species. As Hardy rendered the plaintive anguish of the small bird facing its predator, Woolf incisively describes the emotional responses of other animate beings. Her depictions of their

delight, terror, anger, and affection entreat the reader to value non-human experience as diverse and meaningful. They create a larger sense of community with animals while also critiquing presumed rights of dominion inherent in British culture.

“Kew Gardens” (1919) is one of the few works by Woolf that has been consistently noted for its unique treatment of the non-human: “The fusing processes, particularly that of human with non-human, break down differentiation in the establishment of inter-related harmonies” (Oakland 268). Yet criticism has sometimes teetered on an overly celebratory peak—“There is nothing in the text to suggest that this qualitative movement towards unity is anything but harmonious and optimistic” (Oakland 268). While the story does evoke unity, it also recalls the war and reveals tensions in gender relations. The theme of balance and Woolf’s formal experimentation in prose are anticipated by the story’s original cover art. The first edition copy of “Kew Gardens” at Washington State University’s archive is printed as a pamphlet with a hand-painted paper cover. It has a solid black background that has been brushed over the entire cover, a reminder of the story’s backdrop of war. The black paint is topped with splotches of bright cobalt blue, orange, and a shade of purple made from a combination of the other two colors. The presentation of the cover suggests the story’s prose technique, which features a fragmented style and opposes clear, realist representation. Similarly, references to the flowers at Kew are splashed throughout the prose with reappearing descriptions of their light and color. This first edition also contains a woodcut by Vanessa Bell mingling figures of people with flowers, presenting the figures slightly elongated and askance, as if from an unfamiliar vantage point. The perspective of the

story is also unexpectedly skewed as the action of human characters is presented from the point-of-view of a snail. This unlikely protagonist is attempting to resolve the conflict of how to make its way through an oval flower-bed. Between segments focusing on the snail, the reader is introduced to four sets of couples strolling past the snail's garden plot. Edward Bishop has convincingly argued that the four couples represent middle, upper, and lower class, maturity, old age, and youth, as well as relations between husband and wife, male companions, female friends, and young lovers (271). The reader hears just pieces of their conversation as the omniscient narrator only presents what goes on within the snail's vicinity.

The reader enters the snail's world with dramatic shifts in scale. Initially, the flowers are described as if the reader was him or herself walking past, admiring the summer blooms: "From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface" (90). The reader's gaze is then drawn down deeper, beneath the petals, which are now appreciated from overhead: "The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue, and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour" (90). Just as Woolf sought to record "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" in "Modern Fiction," here she follows the pattern of dappled light as it illuminates the tissue of living matter: "The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of a pebble, or shell of a snail with its circular veins, or, falling into a raindrop, it expanded [. . .] The

light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves” (90). In terms of ecophenomenology, an attentiveness to color and perspective prompts embodied awareness: “To learn to see colours is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image. Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an ‘I think’, it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium. Sometimes a new cluster of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning” (*Phenomenology* 177). Woolf uses prose to evoke an artistic aesthetic that brings together a “fresh sensory entity” of garden and a new “richer meaning” of a shared organic world. Her writing moves away from the “‘I think’” by encouraging the reader to “acquire a certain style of seeing” uniting images, light, and associations that require the reader to integrate “the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity.”

The play of light, atmosphere, and matter is linked to the very basis of thought through Woolf’s suggestive comparison of verdant undergrowth and active, embodied brain. She describes the light as it traces patterns in “flesh” and “veins,” of succulent green tissue, that also resembles a circuited mind in its “branching thread of fibre beneath the surface.” The multiple references to the leaves that are “heart-shaped and tongue-shaped” with “throats” also correlates organic and human flesh, and refers subtly to language, specifically the kind of words that “reveal the flickerings of that innermost

flame which flashes its messages through the brain” (90). Similarly, the thoughts of the human characters will be illuminated in seemingly random patterns of revelation and memory. The human body and the organic matter are coalesced in these images.

Changes in perspective and scale emphasize that all beings are embedded in the thickness of the physical world. Using a stone wall as his example, Merleau-Ponty explains what happens to the body when we allow our gaze to be absorbed by a close object: “There is no longer even a stone there, but merely the play of light upon an indefinite substance” (*Phenomenology* 342). Woolf’s morphing description of falling light in “the vast green spaces” beneath the leaves enacts this kind of engrossed gaze. However, when one’s body moves through space, one’s understanding of visual objects also shifts. Woolf’s description of light moves upward again from the dappled caverns of the undergrowth: “Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July” (90). The reader is shunted from an absorbed view of the undergrowth back to the perspective of the humans walking above the flowers, prompting an awareness of the depth and space of world we move within and the variety of lives that experience it from differing subjective planes. Thus, in one opening paragraph, Woolf destabilizes the reader’s sense of scale, suggesting that there is life worth recording not only from our own perspective, but also from the viewpoint of insects and snails, all interlaced within the world’s thick flesh.

Woolf identifies humans and language with natural phenomena throughout the story. The first couple who meander past the flower-bed is a husband and wife who

recollect their first encounters with love. The man is caught in a reverie about Lily, the woman who refused his proposal of marriage years earlier; her name is another mingling of humans/flowers. The man encapsulates his memory of the rejection with the image of Lily's impatient "square silver shoe-buckle and a dragon fly" (91), an image that stresses form and organicity. Although this memory interjects another woman between the married pair, the wife seems past any jealous provocation. Whether the wife's equanimity is the product of serene security or tired indifference is uncertain: "Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees [. . .] ghosts [of] one's happiness, one's reality?" (91). Woolf affirms the power of setting to inspire self-reflection, illuminating the layers of self-identity and sentiment brought up from the muddy depth of memory and suddenly flashed into consciousness. The wife shares her own emblem of love and happiness, which is also pointedly not part of the past she shares with her husband. Hers is a childhood joy, a memory of "the mother of all my kisses of all my life" (91)—the unexpected kiss of a grey-haired art instructor on the back of her neck when she was only a girl. While the recollections are not about each other, sharing them renews a sense of the couple's intimacy. The pattern of their movement changes correspondingly. At the outset of the interlude the man is walking "six inches in front of the woman" (90), a distance he maintains "purposely" (90), but as they depart the woman calls the children to them and they walk "four abreast." They are physically reunited as they are blended back into the story's canvas and reduced to figures that reenact the previous description of the snail: "[They] soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the

sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches” (91).

Embodied awareness of environmental stimuli pricks memory, the characters communicate this to each other, and then they are absorbed back into the larger communicative efforts of the story’s themes of balance. Indeed the “irregular patches” describe bits of human dialogue as well as the moving pools of sunlight.

Thus while Oakland is correct in his assessment that the story evinces unity, it would be unnecessarily reductive to equate this blending of human and organic life with a denial of human (and non-human) hardship or loss. These aspects are also present, although their threat is folded into the other unifying impulses of the garden so that these darker tones have their place in the balance of the whole. Even the snail’s progress is impeded by difficulties of circumventing “crumbs of loose earth” or “vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture” (91-92). Although the snail finally decides to go under rather than atop or around a major obstacle, the story doesn’t allow the reader to see the snail reach its goal. The snail’s decision-making during its journey may have been influenced by Frederick Gamble’s claims about animal consciousness in *The Animal World* (1911), a book the Woolfs owned. “Above all,” wrote Gamble, “there is in a [non-human] being not only a certain awareness, but a certain power of choice, a certain independence when faced by a multitude of alternatives” (143). Woolf’s depiction of the snail’s independent agency might therefore not be solely fictional, but rather based on scientific descriptions of the possibilities of animal behavior. In Woolf’s world, both humans and non-humans have the capability for rational thought.

Like the snail, humans encounter difficulties too. Though the somber note of marital regret was only lightly sounded in the married couple's conversation, the two men who come along next recall the trauma of war. An old man is operating under delusions that recall shell-shock and grief. His conversation with "spirits of the dead" is punctuated by a cry of, "Women! Widows! Women in black—" (92). His excitement is prompted by seeing a woman wearing a dress "which in the shade looked black" (92). Whether or not this refers to the two working women dressed in black who will saunter into range after this pair leaves is uncertain, just as a reference to an "old man" in the two women's dialogue will ambiguously recall the war veteran. Whether the characters are actually referring to each other doesn't prevent the association for the reader, however, who is continually provoked to make patterns from the apparent randomness. The old man's younger male companion "touch[es] a flower with the tip of his walking cane in order to divert the old man's attention" (92). Yet the flowers prove to be a diversion for several characters, not just the mentally unstable old man. The old man begins talking to the flower as if he could "answer a voice speaking from it" (92). The shape of the flower may resemble a conical earpiece that hangs on an upright receiver, suggesting that the man is imagining another human speaker. In any event, his experience of a direct, sentimental voice that can be understood as if one was speaking to a flower over the phone, is made to look foolish. The reader only gets half of the old man's delusional conversation, but the experience of this kind of dislocation and fragmentation becomes normalized in the context of the story, which is replete with vague and unfinished

dialogue. The possibility of shared communication between environment and perceiving human is not disparaged, but rather revised, by the next couple.

The idea of non-human communication is taken up again as another woman is engrossed by the flowers; but here the play of language renders dialogue as sensory, rather than literal. In the interlude that gives the reader the conversation of two working women, the pattern of the prose is meant to communicate a feeling rather than a precise or lucid meaning:

‘Nell, Bert Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says—’
 ‘My Bert, Sis, Bill, Grandad, the old man, sugar,
 Sugar, flour, kippers, greens
 Sugar, sugar, sugar’ (93)

The “flour,” a homophone for “flower,” and the multiple connotation of “greens” as both salad leaves and the green color of the garden, mix the setting of Kew gardens into the story’s rhetoric. The repetition of “I says” creates rhythm. The mere sound produced by the movement of the tongue, “say[ing],” like the tongue of the flowers, is emphasized over the direct narrative intelligibility of their discourse. Meaning is sensually communicated through movement, sound, memories of people carried in the litany of names, and a certain sense of happiness created by the repetition of “sugar” and its associations with sweetness. One of the women even becomes a kind of flower as she looks at the flower-bed and listens to the friendly prattle: “The ponderous woman looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers standing cool, firm and upright in the earth, with a curious expression. [. . .] She stood letting the words fall over her, swaying the top part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers” (93). The words become the “incessant shower” (“Modern Fiction” 150) “falling over

her” to produce an unconscious lull in her attachment with the human world, allowing her to hear the pattern of words, and to express the physicality of the flowers as she sways her stalk-like body with the breeze. Forms, both in language and human figure, are protean. The flux of nature is the flux of thoughts as they are experienced and life as it is lived.

Embodied perception of the environment propels a back and forth of corporeal interplay between the last couple of young lovers. The two insinuate physically what they cannot yet verbalize or even consciously realize: “The couple stood still on the edge of the flower-bed, and together pressed the end of her parasol deep down into the soft earth. The action and the fact that his hand rested on top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way” (94). The symbolic union of their hands and coinciding penetration of fertile loam hints at the marital and sexual potential of their relationship, provokes them to think of concealed “precipices” and “something loom[ing]” behind their words. The sense of bodily awareness taps undercurrents of weighty thoughts; there is a physical sensory interaction with the environment and each other. The young man’s response is to withdraw from the natural encounter—“he pulled the parasol out of the earth with a jerk and was impatient to find the place where one had tea with other people, like other people”(94)—whereas the woman wishes to engage the non-human world more fully—“trailing her parasol; turning her head this way and that way forgetting her tea, wishing to go down there and then down there, remembering orchids and cranes among wild flowers” (95). Their intercourse with the environment instigates a form of non-literal communication.

The flowers and the atmosphere have combined to pollinate not only the implied sexual urges of the pair, but also the reader's awareness of the text's unique mode of perception. This short story has no linear narrative, no plot and no clear climax; instead "the experience of reading ["Kew Gardens"] initiates, in the sensitive reader, a growth of perception" (Bishop 275). The young couple exchanges vague words with unclear antecedents that nevertheless have meaning within the pattern of the story. The woman brushes aside her suitor's comment on the price of admission saying, "Isn't it worth sixpence?" to which he asks "What's 'it'—what do you mean by 'it'?" (94). The woman's response is unclear as she struggles to find words for the mood created by the garden: "O anything—I mean—you know what I mean" (94). But just as the woman resists putting a price on the experience, Woolf doesn't depreciate the value of ambiguous, half-formed language: "These short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them" (94). Likening the small words to a bee laden with pollen, Woolf seems to suggest that these half-sensory, half-literal gesticulations of communication approximate the gaps and pauses of illumination that comprise ordinary experience. These fissures in form and language are what allow growth. Further, that growth is the development of an interplay of images and atmosphere rather than a clear narrative trajectory.

Woolf's modernist experiments with language are rooted in the kind of embodied perception explained by Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology. As described in *The Visible and the Invisible*, language is not a closed, complete system; or to make an

analogy with Victorian literature, a formulaic plot structure employing straight-forward rhetoric is not the most likely way to capture the kind of essential qualities Woolf lauds in “Modern Fiction.” The words Merleau-Ponty claims most “closely convey the life of the whole” are not those with eloquently precise meanings, but rather the “brute,” “wild” words which “energetically open upon Being” (102). According to Merleau-Ponty, if one wishes to express an essential quality it must be represented by its innate indeterminacy—the kind of language modernists such as Woolf were inserting into literature. In her essay “Craftsmanship” Woolf expresses the vivacious nature of her working material of words. Words, which she proclaims are “the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things” (141), take on an independent life of their own. They “live in the mind [. . .] variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together” (142). She playfully acknowledges the limits of her own ability to pin (or pen) words down. She allows them the potential to have meanings beyond her immediate control as an author by depicting the tendency of language to change and develop as it lives in the mind of the writer as well as language’s transformation when those words are read and absorbed into the minds of readers who may have a multitude of associations and meanings that “mate” and join with those words. Woolf recognizes the charge of this reciprocal openness to being not only in her own vivification of words, but also in the ability of the *words* to leave space for her to engage with *them*: “The test of a book (to a writer) [is] if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. [. . .] This proves that the book itself is alive: because it has not crushed the thing I wanted to say, but

allowed me to slip it in, without any compression or alteration” (*Diary III*: 297-98, 3/17/30). Woolf allows language to form spontaneous or unexpected meanings, and in an equivalent sense a book is most “alive” by allowing her to engage with it and add her own words to the evolving product. As a result, Merleau-Ponty’s brand of ecophenomenological perception provides another possible theory for the reflexive, participatory qualities that make modernist narratives uniquely “new.”

Language is often identified as the dividing line separating humans from other animals. In “Kew Gardens” Woolf de-emphasizes human language as the *sine qua non* by extending communication to include the exchange of non-verbal meanings. However, in other texts she bestows the power of human speech on animal characters. For some literary scholars such devices of personification constitute a pathetic fallacy, the term Ruskin invented to signify any attribution of human characteristics to “*inanimate natural objects*” (Abrams 211, emphasis added). More often, conferring human language on animal characters is labeled anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is “usually applied as a term of reproach, both intellectual and moral” (Daston and Mitman 2). Several recent scholarly works are dedicated to challenging this assumption. It is crucial to distinguish “anthropocentrism”—the assumption that human interests have a higher priority than those of nonhumans—from “anthropomorphism.” According to Buell, “anthropomorphism” is a more complex term wherein “an anthropocentric frame of reference,” including personification, can “dramatize the claims or plight of the natural world” rather than merely projecting human desires upon nature (Buell 134). The human

author is still a mediating presence, but literary devices can be used to undermine and complicate human control.

Lorraine Daston and Greg Mitman justify some forms of personification in writing about non-human animals. They note a shift away from representing animals as a group, both in literature and in other real-world contexts of science and animal activism, repudiating the practice of transposing onto species of animals symbolic human attributes such as bravery, cunning, or loyalty. Instead, the current trend is towards personifying individual animals. Thinking of particular animals as having personal idiosyncrasies is “the way naturalists who knew most and cared most for the animals discussed them” even in documentaries of experienced field biologists (Daston and Mitman 9-10). Daston and Mitman claim that anthropomorphism can be used to think “with” animals. To take this approach is to consider “what it would be like to be that animal” in a way that “roughly parallels that between an introspective approach to human thought, in which the psychologist turns inward and examines the contents of his or her own consciousness as data for understanding the workings of human consciousness” (Daston and Mitman 10). Respecting the life of another living being in part depends upon a capacity for imaginative empathy—a variety of anthropomorphism that is not anthropocentric.

Eileen Crist argues that an emotional continuum between humans and animals was a major piece of Darwin’s evolutionary biology, the particulars of which he elaborated in his 1872 work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, a text Woolf likely read. Darwin argued that human and animal domains were no longer separated by “essential difference” (Crist 11). *The Expression of Emotions in Man and*

Animals furthers his view of an evolutionary continuity by showing that “evolutionary common descent entails the probability that subjective phenomena are not the sole province of human beings” (Crist 17). Crist explains that Darwin even goes so far as to argue that some “animals have powers of imitation, attention, memory, imagination (seen in animals’ dreaming), and reason” (Crist 15). Notably, Darwin’s own pet dog is one animal frequently used as an example of how emotions are manifested through the dog’s gait as well as particular movements of the tail and mouth. Darwin notes how hair, posture, and ears change when the dog is approached by a stranger versus when it is approached by its master and “the body sinks downward or even crouches, and is thrown into flexous movements [. . .] his hair instantly becomes smooth; his ears are depressed and drawn backwards, but not closely to the head; and his lips hang loosely” (50). Darwin uses specific observations of several species of animals in various circumstances as proof that many animals have voluntary physical movements that are used as gestural communications of emotion, similar to the way humans express feelings of despair, anger, or elation.

This same acute sensitivity to detail is apparent in Woolf’s biography of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s spaniel, Flush. The canine biography is based on Woolf’s historical research about Flush gleaned from Elizabeth and Robert Barrett-Browning’s letters. The factual information is, of course, generously padded with Woolf’s own fictional license. This is apparent even in the novel’s pictorial representations. Pinker, the dog Sackville-West gave Woolf in 1926, was used for the frontispiece photograph of Flush. (Hussey *A to Z* 89). The dog is poised and alert across the period-costumed lap of a sitter whose

face does not appear in the photograph. This staged portrait of Flush is presented along with other paintings of the real Miss Mitford and Mrs. Barrett-Browning. But this hybridization of fact and fiction is a familiar tool in Woolf's oeuvre. In *A Room of One's Own* she imagined the life of Shakespeare's sister to round out a polemical critique of a very real gender inequality. A similar amalgamation of realism and fantasy is pertinent to Woolf's activist critique in *Flush*.

On one hand (or paw), *Flush* is a playful novel that amused a large reading audience when it was published in 1933.⁴ The mass acclaim was dubiously received by admirers of her previously published novels and all but extinguished close critical scrutiny of *Flush* for several decades.⁵ Recent critics have begun to reconsider this often overlooked novel. The criticism gravitates towards two concerns often discussed as if they are competing claims. One reading attempts to get past the "comedy" (Snaith 615) of the canine aspects of the text in order to rehabilitate the novel's primary interest in using a dog's life to allegorize weighty issues related to gender, class, and race.⁶ Another reading explicitly sets aside the human social implications of the text, prioritizing instead how the novel depicts "the actuality of an animal's consciousness" (Wylie 117).⁷ I am indebted to both of these approaches, but propose they should be considered as inter-related rather than interpretations that are at odds. *Flush* is primarily about neither humans nor animals, but rather the relationship between them, including what humans should learn about their limited subjective understanding of all "others," as well as how to respect and value difference.

When Flush and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are first introduced to one another, Woolf represents the scene as one of mutual acknowledgment—an open perceiving of one another with the intent to truly experience the resulting sensations and emotions:

‘Oh, Flush!’ said Miss Barrett. For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! [. . .] Could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. Then with one bound Flush sprang on to the sofa and laid himself where he was to lie for ever after—on the rug at Miss Barrett’s feet. (30-31)

The reciprocity of their gaze is initially rendered as an assessment of equal curiosity on the part of woman and dog. Merleau-Ponty explains that “the tactile palpitation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which the palpitation of the eye is a remarkable variant” (*Visible* 133) is the kind of intense, interrogative looking that promotes understanding between two beings. The third person narrator resists attributing recognition to one or the other, but allows the comprehension of physical similarity and spiritual sympathy to be shared by both. The way the prose stutters after the thought that one might “complete” the other implies a romantic rhetoric of love that is abandoned, or perhaps replaced by a courtly version with all the trappings of chaste virtue. They are “closely united” in sympathy but separated by an “immense divide” of difference. Although the scene ends with Flush “on the rug at Miss Barrett’s feet,” suggesting the superiority of human over dog, Woolf gives Flush an agency in acquiescing to bind

himself to human company as if it were his own individual desire motivated by mutual affection rather than a master-pet hierarchy. This complicates readings of Flush as a mere instrument of social critique. The feminist opposition to patriarchal control of education and politics in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* indicates that Woolf would not assume that another human being would so jauntily choose to be stationed below another person. Thus, at times, *Flush* underscores the differences between humans and other animals, particularly pets.

However, the traits that distinguish the canine species are just as often described as superior to the qualities humans possess. Woolf imagines Flush as having an appreciation for the phenomenal world that far exceeds the poetic powers of Britain's most renowned writers:

Here, then, the biographer must perforce come to a pause. Where two or three thousand words are sufficient for what we see [. . .] there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. [. . .] To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power. (137-38)

A similar passage bears out the pervasiveness of Woolf's insistence on Flush's superlative senses:

He knew Florence in its marmoreal smoothness and its gritty and cobbled roughness. Hoary folds of drapery, smooth fingers and feet of stone received the lick of his tongue, the quiver of his shivering snout. [. . .] In short, he knew Florence as no human being has ever known it; as Ruskin never knew it or George Eliot either. He knew it as only the dumb know. Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words. (140)

Flush's animal body allows him to experience an enthralling array of sensations. Woolf's analogy of smell to architecture, law, politics, and science is not mere hyperbole. Dogs know whether a place is safe for sleeping or whether it houses danger by its scent. Similarly, habits of interaction with other dogs—whether to play, fight, retaliate, or put a tail between the hind legs—a dog's governing codes for behavior—are bound up with cues that are particular to other canines. Even the exploratory sniff of a canine nose performs something akin to empirical investigation.

Paradoxically, Woolf's analogies are rooted in a biological understanding of difference. This approach is evident in her earnest efforts to distinguish Flush's perceptions of events from how they would be ascertained through the more limited sensory capacities of her human characters. One of the critics interested in Woolf's rendering of animal consciousness demotes these references as instances where experience "still has to be translated in human terms" (Wylie 119), as if this constitutes a defect. Yet it is the effort of the translation that highlights the inadequacy of human language. Her phrase, "the deformity of words," like the "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning" ("Kew Gardens" 94) betrays the limit of language to delve into the full pungency of what she imagines is a dog's richly odiferous world. She isn't enacting anthropomorphism as much as striving for zoomorphism: "The yearning to understand what it would be like to be, say, an elephant or a cheetah scrambles the opposition between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, that is between humanizing animals and animalizing humans" (Daston and Mitman 8). Woolf's nephew, Quentin Bell, denotes an imaginative effort on Woolf's part that exemplifies the best kind of

anthropomorphism: “*Flush* is not so much a book by a dog lover as a book by someone who would love to be a dog” (Bell 410). Woolf only has human words, but she juxtaposes them in unexpected ways with how she might imagine culture or society and personal interaction were she in a dog’s skin. The novel is therefore less about satirizing the non-human animal than it is about revealing the restrictive conventions upon which human communication hinges.

Remarkably, *Flush*’s better qualities are not limited to his physical attributes of scent and touch. Woolf fictionalizes a heightened capacity for empathy on the part of *Flush* in comparison with her human characters. Describing *Flush*’s attentiveness to his first owner, she writes:

Flush, as his story proves, had an even excessive appreciation of human emotions. The sight of his dear mistress snuffing the fresh air at last, letting it ruffle her hair and redden the natural freshness of her face, while the lines on her huge brow smoothed themselves out, excited him to gambols whose wildness was half sympathy with her own delight. (19-20)

The ruffled “hair” and smoothed wrinkles are features that could be equally recognizable as an expression of canine pleasure and release, but there is no hint that either of *Flush*’s human companions is sensitive to his manifestations of emotions. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. When *Flush* is stolen by fanciers who specialize in bribing wealthy pet owners, Woolf stresses Barrett’s inability to appreciate what *Flush* might be going through. *Flush*’s captivity is terrifying: “The room was dark. It grew steadily hotter and hotter; the smell, the heat, were unbearable; *Flush*’s nose burnt; his coat twitched. And still Miss Barrett did not come” (93). Miss Barrett’s capacity for empathy seems limited in comparison: “Miss Barrett lay on her sofa at Wimpole Street. She was vexed; she was

worried, but she was not seriously alarmed. Of course Flush would suffer; he would whine and bark all night; but it was only a question of a few hours” (93). Five days of starvation and dehydration pass before a proxy (not Barrett) finally arrives to collect Flush. When he gets back home, he experiences something that resembles human shell-shock as his mind throws him back to the sounds of his frightful abduction: “As he lay dazed and exhausted on the sofa at Miss Barrett’s feet the howls of tethered dogs, the screams of birds in terror still sounded in his ears” (109). Barrett’s disappointment at Flush’s less than enthusiastic response at being released back to her shows a similar inattentiveness to the dog’s own needs. Woolf’s fictional narration offers another reason that the character of Barrett doesn’t consider—the dog’s basic thirst commands his first priority upon return. In the words of Craig Smith, this shows how “the conventional human expectation of creatures who are created for our pleasure is unmasked here as a failure of human empathy” (Smith 356). Yet Barrett-Browning’s literary career attests to her concern for others; she was devoted to exposing the cruelty of child labor practices and rails against the horrors she imagines they experience. Indeed, as Barrett-Browning’s letters indicate and Woolf dramatizes, she defied not only her father, but also Robert Browning in deciding to meet the thieves’ demands and pay the ransom for Flush’s life. Woolf sympathized with the personal challenges that Barrett-Browning faced⁸ so it is doubtful that she would intend to malign her personally. Instead, by using such a well-intentioned human subject, the failing seems less attached to her and more indicative of a shortcoming of humans in general.

The class structure of society and the superficial assumptions of cultural bias are, however, factors that play a prominent part in the novel's critique not only of how humans treat non-human animals, but also of how they regard other humans. Flush, who is both a dog and an aristocrat due to his breeding, participates in social stratification:

Dogs therefore, Flush began to suspect, differ; some are high, others low; and his suspicions were confirmed by snatches of talk held in passing with the dogs of Wimpole Street. 'See that scallywag? A mere mongrel! . . . By gad, that's a fine Spaniel. One of the best blood in Britain!' (39)

This passage enacts a hierarchy that is culturally conditioned rather than biologically determined. Snaith comments, "By attributing the 'bestial' view of Whitechapel to an aristocratic *dog*, Woolf exposes the ridiculousness of the hierarchies" (Snaith 623).

Revealingly, the clues Flush uses to assess how status is ascertained—"Some take their airings in carriages and drink from purple jars" (39)—are the same kind of shallow monikers that stuff the society columns.

Yet conflating animals with human suffering also exposes the gravity of harm. In other passages Woolf likens Barrett-Browning's confinement to that of a pet on a leash or a caged animal: "She could not go out. She was chained to the sofa. 'A bird in a cage would have as good a story,' she wrote, as she had" (43). Woolf also draws a comparison between farm animals and humans forced to live in squalor: "Yet how could one describe politely a bedroom in which two or three families lived above a cow-shed, when the cow-shed had no ventilation, when cows were milked and killed and eaten under the bedroom?" (86). The problem of human indifference towards both other humans and animals of other species is criticized. The degradation of humans has historically been reinforced through comparison to non-human animals:

Arguments for human specialness have regularly been utilized by human groups to justify the exploitation not just of other organisms, but of other *humans* as well (other nations, other races, or simply the 'other' sex); armed with such arguments, one had only to demonstrate that these others were not *fully* human, or were 'closer to the animals' in order to establish one's right of dominion. (Abram 48)

Making these parallels in the context of a novel about a dog, however, has the effect of deriding, rather than reinforcing, assumptions of superiority. If the reader can readily appreciate how Flush is harmed by Barrett-Browning's erroneous presuppositions about his life, the deliberate silencing of the suffering of humans who can communicate through language becomes shamefully acute. *Flush* discerns the ways in which the upper class is often mistaken in their assumptions about their servants. In a note to the text, Woolf quotes one of Barrett-Browning's letters praising the bravery and boldness of her maid, Wilson, in coming with her to Italy in defiance of her father. Woolf surmises that Wilson may have had little choice but to follow her employer:

It is worth, parenthetically, dwelling for a second on the extreme precariousness of a servant's life. If Wilson had not gone with Miss Barrett, she would have been, as Miss Barrett knew, 'turned into the street before sunset,' with only a few shillings, presumably, saved from her sixteen pounds a year. And what then would have been her fate? (178)

Snaith astutely points out that the class dynamics have implications for Woolf as well: "[Woolf] has the power to bring lives up from the basement: to make lives for Flush and Wilson" (620). Although Woolf conscientiously draws attention to Wilson's plight, and remonstrates that "The life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure and thus cries out for the services of a biographer" (176), Woolf seems to beg the question of why she chose to write this biography about Flush instead of Wilson.

One possible rejoinder is that the non-human focus allows for a more persuasive assessment of discrimination as a cultural construction. Both Flush and Barrett-Browning thrive in the more democratic atmosphere of Italy. In Florence, “Flush faced the curious and at first upsetting truth that the laws of the Kennel Club are not universal. [. . .] He had revised his code accordingly. [. . .] He was the friend of all the world now. All dogs were his brothers” (125). Flush’s previous illusion regarding the fixed status of particular breeds is shattered—such hierarchies among and between species are not innate, they are the creation of a particularly English sense of social propriety. Not only are dogs liberated from the strictures of breeding class in Italy, but Flush also shows signs of enjoying a less dependent status in relation to humans: “He had no need of a chain in this new world; he had no need of protection. If Mr. Browning was late in going for his walk—he and Flush were the best of friends now—Flush boldly summoned him” (125). All hierarchies, including the gulf between humans and “lower” animals, have been turned on their heads as Flush now “summon[s]” the human. The effect is a challenge to the entrenched conviction that humans, particularly the British ruling class, are automatically entitled to priority over others.

In Woolf’s work it is not just the humans who get to analyze and claim dominion over the environment; non-human forces are equally capable of examining and hypothesizing about the human animal. The suggestive equivalency Woolf establishes between humans and non-human nature is often foundational to her political critique of empire. In “Thunder at Wembley” Woolf’s subject is the dynamic interaction between humans, animals, and weather during the spring Exhibition of Empire in London, which

she and Leonard toured in May 1924. The exhibition was a miniature version of the British empire that constructed a fiction of its own stewardship and benevolent interest in foreign territories. The Exhibit of 1924 featured:

A map of the world that could be strolled in a well-planned afternoon or over several days, as the official guide recommended. Every territory that could afford to build a pavilion had one at the exhibition. Along with the Palaces of Industry, Engineering, and Science, the largest structures were reserved for pavilions representing India, Canada, and Australia, each occupying about five acres. Wembley allowed visitors to inspect their empire, either while strolling the fifteen miles of roads named by Rudyard Kipling or riding in one of eighty-eight carriages circling the park on the Never-Stop Railway. (Cohen 87)

Insidiously evocative of current amusement parks, the deliberate entertainment and storytelling function is evident in employing a famous adventure novelist and defender of the empire to name the exhibit's roads.

In contrast, Woolf is interested in narrating what *isn't* in the exhibit. Her story highlights England's solipsistic exclusion of all that doesn't programmatically reflect its unquestioned control. From the outset of "Thunder at Wembley," anything associated with nature is at odds with authority: "It is nature that is the ruin of Wembley; yet it is difficult to see what steps Lord Stevenson, Lieutenant-General Travers Clarke, and the Duke of Devonshire could have taken to keep her out" (410). Woolf satirically muses that "they might have eradicated the grass and felled the chestnut trees" (411). The verbs "eradicate" and "fell" suggest the violent action of war and overthrow, a prerequisite for the imperial control the exhibit is designed to exalt. Likewise, ecophenomenology rebuffs the traditional view of human hierarchy; instead of being apart from or above other animals, humans are "in the midst of, rather than on top of this order" (Abram 153). While humans are in the process of observing and passing judgment on the life around

them—as the British citizens are doing at the Exhibition of Empire—other animals are also scrutinizing human behavior. Consequently, the human species becomes the animal to be examined.

A crucial question about the British citizens in “The Thunder at Wembley” is posed by a bird: “And what, one asks, is the spell it lays upon them? How, with all this dignity of their own, can they bring themselves to believe in that?” (412). The bird is the agent questioning how these people could believe in “that,” the supposed glories of imperial conquest. Woolf writes, “But this cynical reflection, at once so chill and superior, was made, of course, by the thrush” (412). Woolf endows the thrush with sentience and an ability to critique the human species. The choice of the thrush, in particular, has ecological relevance. *Birds In London*, a book the Woolfs owned which was published the year Woolf was writing “Thunder at Wembley,” details the precarious survival of the thrush as a result of human activity in the parks and the importation of exotic plants: “Of all these vanishing species the thrush is most to be regretted, on account of its beautiful, varied, and powerful voice. [. . .] In these vast gardens and parks [. . .] there should be ample room for many scores of the delightful songsters that are now vanishing or have already vanished” due in part to planting “so many unsuitable exotic shrubs” (Hudson 115-118). The fact that this species is at risk due in part to the importation of foreign plants makes the thrush a particularly appropriate commentator on the threat of colonialism.

Furthermore, the “superior” thrush disrupts the chain of human hierarchy by articulating an insight that people have not yet recognized about themselves. As Cohen

notes, the people at the exhibit are both “readers” of the exhibit’s tale of conquest, but they are also “characters” (93) manipulated by its carefully constructed layout as they walk through and play the role of gawking tourist. The titled authorities may think they can encapsulate the world in an exhibit based on English supremacy, but nature and the non-human can’t be kept out. Other animals are equally, if not more perceptively, cognizant of the human specimens on display.

Woolf’s empathy for the non-human perspective both reveals a resonant more-than-human world, and emphatically stresses the folly of humanity’s exalted notions of its own importance. For Woolf, being in conversation with non-human creatures acknowledges collective community and expands literary representations of daily life. As Abram explains, “Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth’s animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence” (47). Woolf’s ability to make visible what often goes unseen and unspoken in the surrounding environment distinguishes her attempts to render a meaningful experience of human life.

The Meaning of a More-Than-Human Life in *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is traditionally understood as an elegiac commentary on the apocalyptic crisis of World War One. An ecocritical reading of the novel reveals an ever-present tension between dark impulses of apocalypse, and the invigorating potential of embodied interaction with the encompassing environment.

Embodied encounters with the natural world spur her characters' thoughts about their place in the larger world and reveal the unconscious bonds that sustain them. Woolf's depiction of embodied life in a shared organic world generates the novel's ultimate affirmation, the creation of Lily Briscoe's art. Non-human life and nature are depicted as distinct from human concerns, and yet they participate in and respond to the same events and stimuli. *To the Lighthouse* rejects a romantic "oneness"—a belief that nature exists to serve humans or mirror their emotions—in favor of this kind of intertwining. Many accounts of *To the Lighthouse* overlook how major events in the novel, like Lily's painting, depend on an embodied participation in the very flux of environmental forces that other critics deem antagonistic. An ecophenomenological reading of *To the Lighthouse* complicates conventional readings of the novel that treat nature as antagonistic to humanity, or as an agent of apocalyptic destruction; instead environmental presences in the novel compete with these readings to suggest the creativity and rejuvenation that come from acknowledging humans as creatures embedded in a more-than-human world.

Critical appraisals of the "Time Passes" section of the novel—which informs the reader of the death of primary characters by means of bracketed asides while the organic changes taking place in the neglected seaside home constitute the main action—commonly assume that despair and ruin are the primary themes. Christine Froula's recent analysis claims that "Time Passes" "evokes a world emptied of life," "a world lapsed out of meaning," and "foreshadows death's oblivion" (153-54). Similarly, Julia Briggs declares, "'Time Passes' is a rhapsody upon time, death and endings" (175).

Though death and emptiness are certainly important aspects of the novel, these analyses overlook the complexity of Woolf's efforts to depict the non-human world in this section of the novel. Although Louise Westling writes primarily on *Between the Acts* in "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," she offers a provocative contrasting analysis of "Time Passes" by pinpointing the source of "tragedy" as emanating from a realization that "centuries of humanist assumptions are overturned" (860). This revelation may be startling for readers, but it is ultimately productive for ushering in a new appreciation of other diverse forms of life. I contend that Woolf's vision of human experience depends on a dialectic that has despair and loss as one pole, but unity and hope as the other. Laura Doyle has helpfully pointed the way towards acknowledging the importance of embodiment in *To the Lighthouse* arguing, "Woolf corporealizes the spaces rendered empty by patriarchal culture and thought" and "situates the mother strategically at the center of this power-inflected intercorporeality" (43, 50). However, Doyle's emphasis on the tension between patriarchal philosophy and maternal phenomenology in the novel is too constrictive. First, it obscures how Lily Briscoe revises Mrs. Ramsay's perspective by unifying light and dark, a detail which suggests that the mother is not the most important figure in the text. Second, it neglects Mr. Bankes' capacity for embodied appreciation, a trait which resists gendering phenomenal awareness. My reading builds on Doyle's recognition of embodiment in the novel, but extends beyond her interest in gender codes to suggest ecophenomenology's significance for understanding the novel's larger theme of embracing the potential of change and uncertainty as a source of creativity and renewal.

Although Woolf's interest in eulogizing her own family lends biographical credence to the novel's darker impulses⁹, biography also hints at a balance between loss and rejuvenation. Woolf's friendship with Vita Sackville-West was ongoing while she was writing *To the Lighthouse*. Sackville-West's *Country Notes* (1939) express a belief in renewal that correlates with Woolf's representations of nature's persistency:

I suppose the pleasure of the country life lies really in the eternally renewed evidences of the determination to live. That is a truism when said, but anything but a truism when daily observed... The small green shoot appearing one day at the base of a plant one had feared dead, brings a comfort and an encouragement for which the previous daily observance is responsible. The life principle has proved unconquerable, then, in spite of frost and winds? The powers of resistance against adversity are greater than we thought; the germ of life lies hidden even in the midst of apparent death. A cynic might contend that nothing depressed him more than this resoluteness to keep going; it depends on the angle from which you regard this gallant tenacity... If you have a taste for such things, no amount of repetition can stale them; they stand for permanence in a changing world. (11-12)

Sackville-West's "angle" on the world offers a perspective that recasts "permanence" as the promise of perpetual change—the months of noting the absence of the "small green shoot" are necessary for creating the ensuing feelings of "comfort" and "encouragement" when it breaks the ground again. The "tenacity" Sackville-West's essay affirms in these natural cycles of the "life [. . .] hidden in the midst of apparent death" resemble the "thistle thrust[ing] itself between the tiles of larder" in "Time Passes."

Woolf's own memories on the anniversary of her mother's death are capped by an immersion in an embodied consideration of nature's capacity for stimulating something new. A diary entry from May 5, 1924, the 29th anniversary of Julia Stephen's death, describes Woolf's recollection of herself as a thirteen year-old girl in the presence of her

mother's dead body, laughing uncomfortably behind her hand as the nurses sobbed. The entry transitions from this memory to a contemplation of life and nature:

But enough of death—it is life that matters. We came back from Rodmell 7 days ago, after a royal Easter which Nelly survived heroically. After weeding I had to go in out of the sun; and how the quiet lapped me round! and then how dull I got, to be quite just: and how the beauty brimmed over me and steeped my nerves till they quivered, as I have seen a water plant quiver when the water overflowed it. (This is not right, but I must one day express that sensation). (*Diary II:301*)

The movement from a consideration of death, to writing about a quietness that bursts unexpectedly into beauty that “steeped [her] nerves till they quivered” like a plant receiving water, expresses a tight oscillation between the impulses of loss and life. The “life that matters” still comes through. The way it makes itself known comes from a submersion into stillness, a giving over to the atmosphere of solitude around her that rewards her patience with inspiration. In terms of Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology, one might say that Woolf “obtains [from embodied reverie] not an *answer* but a confirmation of its astonishment (*Visible* 101-02). The fact that she can't find the right words to express the experience attests to the difficulty of capturing embodied revelation in prose, yet doesn't negate the sensation of being subsequently renewed by the unexpected encounter.

Similar instances of embodied revelation comprise many pivotal moments of silent communication in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily acts “with all her senses quickened as they were” (21), and “Mr. Bankes was alive to things which would not have struck him had not those sandhills revealed to him the body of his friendship” with Mr. Ramsay (25). Merleau-Ponty explains that consciousness is always filtered through our physical experience of being bodies in the world: “As for consciousness, it has to be conceived, no

longer as a constituting consciousness and, as it were, a pure being-for-itself, but as a *perceptual* consciousness, as the subject pattern of behavior, as being-in-the-world or existence” (*Phenomenology* 409, emphasis added). The inner consciousness isn’t solipsistic or enclosed, but exists in relationship with the physical environment. Woolf composes long passages to put these links between world and mind into words, as in this scene describing Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes’ shared experience of the seaside:

They came there regularly every evening as if drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated out and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief. First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness on the ruffled waves. Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of pure water [. . .] They both felt a common hilarity excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailboat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails drop down; and then, with a natural impulse to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness—because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest. (24)

This passage explicitly engages the minds of Lily and Mr. Bankes, who are “drawn” to the vibrant scene through their perceiving bodies. Thoughts are set in motion in accordance with the movement of the ships on the water. The blueness of the sky “expands” the “heart” yet in the next instant the cold sea-salted air “checks” and “chills” the body. These varying responses to divergent environmental prompts are seen again when the characters react with “hilarity” to the thrill of erratic bursts of water and then experience feelings of sadness produced by gazing towards the dunes. The view of the dunes isn’t necessarily at odds with the “merriment” of the sea scene. Instead, it is “a

natural impulse to complete the picture” that prompts the viewers to look towards the distant dunes. This swaying of perspectives will recur when Mr. Ramsey, James, and Cam sail to the lighthouse in the third section of the novel, causing Lily to muse upon the effects of distance and individual perspective. Both of these poles are necessary for a “complete” understanding of place and people.

As with Woolf’s diary entry, the sensations produced in Lily and Mr. Banks don’t lead to a resolution as much as they provoke wonder. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, this kind of embodied participation in viewing the natural world and appreciating its palpable presence suggests the potential of the environment to exist in and for itself, beyond human control, even as it is perceived through the human body:

As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it in some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. But, it may be retorted, the sky is not mind and there is surely no sense in saying that it exists for itself. It is indeed true that the geographer’s or the astronomer’s sky does not exist for itself. But of the sky, as it is perceived or sensed, subtended by my gaze which ranges over and resides in it, and providing as it does the theatre of a certain living pulsation adopted by my body, it can be said that it exists for itself. (*Phenomenology* 249)

The fact that the sky, or the view, acts upon the human attests to the agency of the non-human world. The reaction is registered both physically through the “living pulsation adopted by my body” and mentally as the sky “thinks itself within me” and “saturates” human thought. This same non-human agency and intertwined body-mind response characterizes Woolf’s depictions of human characters reacting to their environment. Her representations invest the environment with its own agency and power.

Part of humanity's experience in a world not fully regulated by human control is the pull between alternating surges of loss and joy. The novel's phenomenal aspects create the positive tensions that most critics overlook. Mrs. Ramsay's response to the pulsing beams of the lighthouse illuminates the novel's revolving emotions of loss and discovery. Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay's embodied perception—based on “sound” and “sight”—of the lighthouse and the sea:

Always, Mrs. Ramsay felt, one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight. She listened but it was all very still; cricket was over; the children were in their baths; there was only the sound of the sea. She stopped knitting; she held the long reddish-brown stocking dangling in her hands a moment. She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all one's relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly [. . .] It is enough! It is enough! (67-68)

Once again, stillness and attentiveness precede revelation. Mrs. Ramsay questions, an “interrogation,” but receives differing impulses or “answers,” the result of “when one woke” or the state of becoming conscious of surrounding stimuli in a new way. She identifies with the light, but also distances herself from it, acknowledging that it is still somehow different from her. The light alternatively inspires reflections of that which is “pitiless” or “remorseless” and that which gives, through a direct physical interaction of “stroking” the brain, an intense “delight.” As Laura Doyle notes, the image is infused with female sexual innuendo (53), a point which, I argue, also emphasizes the intimacy of the human and non-human interaction. Mrs. Ramsay's surrender to the stimulus

presented by her surroundings—the crickets, the sea, the light across the floor—stirs new impulses of hope.

This understanding of the world as an agent that interacts with humans on an embodied level, rather than something inanimate that humans control, expresses the divergence between the other characters' experiences of reality and Mr. Ramsay's adherence to a philosophical reduction of reality. Mr. Ramsay's quest to get from "Q" to "R" in the scheme of human achievement represents a methodological hierarchy that can be teleologically comprehended as a predictable progression. It assumes that knowledge exists on a mental plane manipulated by human thought and detached from embodied experience. The epitome of this detachment is expressed in Andrew Ramsey's efforts to explain his father's philosophy to Lily by giving her the following directive: "Think of a kitchen table [. . .] when you're not there" (26). The ridiculousness of this kind of philosophy is exposed when Lily imagines the table: "with a painful effort of concentration, she focused her mind, not upon the silver-bossed bark of the tree, or upon its fish-shaped leaves, but upon a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in air" (27). The upside-down table is a bit farcical, or as Westling writes, "thoroughly satiric" (860). Its position is completely at odds with the function of a table. Lily's thoughts gravitate towards the kinds of details that make the table a physical entity—it is "scrubbed," "grained and knotted," and possesses a structural "integrity." While it is unclear exactly what Andrew's instructions were meant to make Lily comprehend, Lily tries to place the table in the material world.

By seeing it in a tree, she implicitly associates the table with its natural source—not the human mind, but the organic life of the tree’s living wood. While at least one critic has used Woolf’s skeptical view of philosophy to argue that any application of a philosophical theory to her work is deleterious¹⁰, Merleau-Ponty’s embodied philosophy is also at odds with the kind of philosophy that Woolf mocks in *To the Lighthouse*.

Abram explains how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy relies on an engagement with the world rather than a detachment from it:

By disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of ‘what is’ requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow *outside* of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand. (47)

Embodied phenomenology, in fact, affirms the values inherent in Woolf’s retort. The “complete picture of reality” that ecophenomenology rebuffs coincides with the image of an alphabet, discrete units that can be known from beginning to end, or A to Z. Both Merleau-Ponty and Woolf reject totalizing theories. The mind can’t be severed from reality or understood by visualizing an object without any relation to the human perceiver. Instead, Merleau-Ponty and Woolf advance an understanding of humans “within” the world—a co-existence that “rejuvenat[es] our sense of wonder” at that which remains undefinable and dynamically evasive. Thus, Woolf affirms the instinct that humans are bound by reciprocal threads that bind us to a shared experience of the world.

Communal awareness and interconnectivity are key themes in one of the novel's most memorable scenes, the dinner party. Ecophenomenological awareness of the atmosphere creates an undercurrent of unity in these passages—bodies sharing the same space participate in a positive moment of connection between individuals. Initially, everyone is separate and feels acutely isolated: “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate” (86); “Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking” (96). Mrs. Ramsay feels a responsibility to draw these individuals together, and so “giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper” (86). Here Woolf's prose also participates in the merging by fusing together a myriad of symbols. She combines the watch, a symbol of individual human lives passing, with the three pulses of the lighthouse. The lighthouse, in turn, is also associated with the feeble flame of protection that Mrs. Ramsay has felt as a fleeting joy that makes the effort of life worthwhile. However, the flame also alludes to the lighting of the centerpiece candles, which inaugurate an atmosphere of unity:

Now all the candles were lit up and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all

conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island, had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (99-100)

The atmosphere of the room is changed by the flames waving against the black windowpanes. Now there is a unity among the individuals at the table, forming a kind of protective center, but the word “island” also recalls the unity of Britain itself. This is the kind of stability that Mrs. Ramsay wishes to keep, the promise of a center of light that doesn’t disappear and reappear in rhythmic beats, but rather emanates, through the power of human effort, light without end. The room itself is described as the lamp of the lighthouse: the candles are the source of focusing light “compos[ing]” the party and shining out through panes of glass that “rippled,” creating “a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily.” Thus, the dinner scene is transformed into one of the novel’s visions of the lighthouse. However, this vision of solidarity will be challenged by the proliferation of other perspectives on the lighthouse and its significance.

Transitoriness is fundamental to the dinner party—perishable food is consumed, candles burn down, everyone will finally rise and depart. Yet these diminishment are part of what gives the meal its poignancy and value.

The presence of a variety of points of view on the same object is also a unifying feature of the scene, as we will see at the end of the novel with multiple perspectives on the lighthouse itself. The glow of the candles illumines another artistic bringing together, Rose’s fruit arrangement, making shadows and hollows of color on the table “like a world in which one could take one’s staff and climb hills [Mrs. Ramsay] thought” (99). She notices Augustus looking too, but “plunging in” and “breaking off a tassel there,” which was “his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them”

(99). Merleau-Ponty elucidates the alchemy of such unity: “‘Private worlds’ communicate” because each is “a variant of one common world” (*Visible* 11). It is only through our shared experience in the same phenomenal world that we can begin to identify truths that can be shared by all: “It is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds [. . .] which connects our perspectives, permits transition from one to the other” (*Visible* 13). The shared experience of eating the food, being encompassed in the light emanating from the center of the table, and gazing upon the creations placed on it, are part of the atmosphere that allows for the “private worlds” of each individual to “communicate.”

Between “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” sections of the novel, Woolf inserts “Time Passes,” a narration of the changes that occur to the summer home during ten years of the family’s absence, including the timespan of World War I. Yet even the presence of war is alluded to in the first section of the novel. While Mrs. Ramsay is reading to her son James, she hears:

Suddenly a loud cry, as of a sleep-walker, half-roused, something about
 Stormed at with shot and shell
 Sung out with the utmost intensity in her ear, made her turn apprehensively. (20)

The line “Stormed at with shot and shell” creates a break in the prose, appearing off by itself, as if a bomb has ripped through the paragraph. It anticipates visually the shelling that will kill one of the Ramsays’ sons during the war: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (137). Like the offset type above, the brackets segregate this section of text encapsulating the sentences in a way that both treats them as an

insignificant aside and also emphasizes the suddenness of disaster—the explosive revelations are packed into the casing of the brackets. “Stormed at with shot and shell” is a line from a Tennyson poem that Mr. Ramsay is reciting, “Charge of the Light Brigade.” So this evocation of a Victorian colonial military disaster ironically presages the carnage of World War I. These textual repetitions create an ecophenomenological sense that humans are already synchronized with a larger repeating rhythm of the world:

Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalization such as we experience in that quasi-stupor to which we are reduced when we try to live at the level of sensation [. . .] Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain aspects and synchronized with them. (*Phenomenology* 250-51)

Mrs. Ramsay’s apprehension at hearing her husband’s unexplained shout of interruption is not only a reaction to the moment, but also an instinct of fear that goes beyond herself in the present moment and carries with it an awareness of some impending potential harm. The reference to “a loud cry, as of a sleep-walker, half-roused” also foreshadows Mr. Ramsay’s grief at the death of his wife, another event revealed in “Time Passes”: “[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). Mr. Ramsay’s shout, heard by Mrs. Ramsay through the window, is out of context and unexplained, exemplifying not only the modernist style of fragmented prose, but disrupting the narrative, as the war will tear into a generation of lives, leaving them without the context of satisfying explanations or meanings. The awkward, disjointed sentence describing Mr. Ramsay’s arms with tripping dependent

clauses thrust in at odd intervals replicates the sensation of his stumbling, confused, sleep-walking grief. The sleep-walking state of mind further creates a sensation of anonymity, an anonymity repeated in the phrase “twenty or thirty young men [. . .] among” which was Andrew. The chilling vagueness as to the exact number of lives lost, and the obscurity of Andrew within this group suggests a collective grief, not exclusive just to these individuals, or this family, but a wider, anonymous sharing in the experience of death and war. Sounded in a summer day years before the war would actually happen, these experiences would eventually be repeated again in a second world war, and in other deaths yet to come. Stimulated by an awareness beyond her own individual understanding, Lily too will act from the same instincts; this synchronicity with the world doesn’t only register doom or peril, but also inspiration, continuation and hope.

By sinking these revelations about her characters into a section devoted primarily to non-human life, Woolf shifts the focus of experience to a larger host of sentient beings living within the spectrum of human politics and history. Decay and transformation don’t perpetuate despair as much as they offer alternatives for life different from usual human expectations. Westling’s reading of the “empty” barn in *Between the Acts* is instructive. The barn empty of human characters is still full of scuttling animal life, suggesting “the proper context for rethinking human destiny: a giddy tangle of forms and beings within each kind dances its own rhythm, irrepressibly intertwined” (867). Similarly, in “Time Passes” the suffusion of moist green decay and animal life invade the Ramsay home:

A thistle thrust itself between the tiles of the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind wainscots. Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the

window-pane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass; giant artichokes towered among roses; a fringed carnation flowered among the cabbages; while the gentle tapping of a weed at the window had become, on winters' nights, a drumming from sturdy trees and thorned briars which made the whole room green in summer. (141)

This is a house where life wants to live. It is teeming with creatures making it their home, and filling it with sound, color and beauty. Just as Mrs. Ramsay is the central figure of the first section of the novel, "The Window," and passes away with brief mention during "Time Passes," a butterfly too, patters and expires in the same window, equating the life cycles of the resident insects and animals with the previous human occupants. Wildness proliferates in "giant artichokes," "fringed carnations," and other organic forms that make music by "tapping" and "drumming." The "whole room [is] green" with summer's unvanquished ardor. The absence of humans in "Time Passes" isn't necessarily dismal or dreadful. In fact, this representation of heretofore overlooked non-human life is the epitome of the kind of unexpected, unacknowledged, ordinary life that Woolf's "Modern Fiction" champions. As Doyle explains, "Woolf and Merleau-Ponty interlace life with death, trace the intertwining of emptiness and fullness, and in this different way 'triumph' over the finality of death" (48). When the narrator imagines what would happen if the house were completely overtaken by nature, its structural transformation has beauty even for other humans who might come there: "In the ruined room, picnickers would have lit their kettles; lovers sought shelter there, lying on the bare boards; and the shepherd stored his dinner on the bricks, and the tramp slept with his coat round him to ward off the cold" (142). This imagined fate of the "ruined" house still insists on life residing there. Even if it loses its identity as an upper-class vacation

cottage, the home would still shelter other lives. It would witness other joys, other meals, and other sleepers.

Thus, while erosion and loss are present in “Time Passes,” they represent more than “a sense of nature as impervious to human suffering, blind and silent, a sadly familiar theme in twentieth-century literature” (Briggs 176). It includes this theme, but the narrative in “Time Passes” also moves beyond it into something more inclusive and hopeful. Additionally, the novel as a whole doesn’t make nature the only agent “impervious to suffering.” In “The Lighthouse” section, another death occurs in brackets: “[Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]” (183). The repetition of the brackets encapsulating just two sentences narrating extreme and sudden suffering references the human deaths in “Time Passes.” Some of the soldiers who fought in the war may have been similarly punctured by shrapnel that exploded holes in their bodies. They were sacrificed as military bait for a larger political (not environmental) agent. But while Andrew’s death “mercifully, was instantaneous,” the fish is thrown back “mutilated” but “alive still” in a gruesome image of pain and torture. Nature is not the only agent, or even the primary agent, of suffering. Nature exists for itself in this novel. It is not at the service of humans; but it isn’t an enemy either. Rather, Woolf renders the lives of humans and non-humans as consistently intertwined. Merleau-Ponty explains that “far from opening upon the blinding light of pure Being or of the Object, our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an

atmosphere” (*Visible* 84). That atmosphere is comprised by the same elements that

Woolf integrates into her rhythmic structure:

It is constantly enshrouded by those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of the human life, the present and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with between them all, that cohesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergences of one same something. (*Visible* 84)

Human and non-human characters are distinct, but Woolf provides evidence that there is a tremendous enveloping presence of many different kinds of beings that are all born, create nests, confront peril or interference, perish, and persist.

Non-human life exists in the house even when the Ramsays are still in residence.

It is referenced in Mrs. Ramsay’s reflections on what the children (the next generation) talk about:

Anything, everything: Tansley’s tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; seabirds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl who was sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing. Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh, that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsey deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense. (12)

While Mrs. Ramsay may not fully appreciate the significance of her children’s debates—the new mode of talking about “anything, everything”—her eclectic list represents the kind of conglomeration of everyday life experiences, human and non-human, divergent yet shared, that form the stuff of modern fiction. The planks don’t separate rooms and lives into hierarchies of upstairs and downstairs; they let sound and

light pass through, allowing often overlooked people and things to be known. The presence of another's grief for a lost family member is part of the atmosphere. Bats and beetles live there. The sea is also there, brought in by human activity, but also anticipating the natural erosion of the house in "Time Passes." As Merleau-Ponty elucidates, a representation of embodied life reveals that there is no "pure Being"; it is "a pell-mell ensemble" of entities that have their own unique divergences, yet also share a common space of experience that "twist[s] into the very fibre of being," the very essence of an embodied life.

The novel rejects the belief that nature and humans are "one," or that the non-human functions as a mirror for human experience; instead it privileges an intertwined relationship between the two. Mrs. Ramsay indulges in an older form of pathetic fallacy: "She thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees; streams; flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one; in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself" (66). The paratactic style emphasizes simplistic correlation in its short repetitive clauses. Mrs. Ramsey's sentiment expresses a desire for nature to always be in sympathy with human existence. But it isn't, as the narrator reminds us in a description of the "perfectly indifferent chill night air" (117). "Time Passes" marks the repudiation of the pathetic fallacy: "Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror [. . .] the mirror was broken" (138). Woolf creates a non-

human representation which functions not merely to define the human characters, either as antagonistic foil or sympathetic mirror. These other lives exist for themselves within a shared world. Rendering the environment through embodied perception creates an awareness that non-human life is distinct from human concerns, and yet participates in and responds to the same events and stimuli.

Mrs. McNab's song towards the end of "Time Passes" expresses this paradox of fragmentation and cohesion—lives that share similarities, but are not identical. Mrs. McNab acts as the airs that fingered and wore the walls of the house. As she "rolled from room to room, she sang. Rubbing the glass" (134). Eroding and cleaning are given a similar feel. The song she sings to pass the time as she works combines light with dark, optimism with despair, "as if, after all, she had her consolations, as if indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope" (135). Who or what is producing the song becomes unclear:

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, disservered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a dorbeetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonizing, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonized, and at last, in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls. (145)

Here is the mosaic of life experience. Importantly, Woolf offers no ecstatic union, but an effort, a "half-heard melody" which in its repeating patterns "is always on the verge of harmonizing." This verge, the strain to understand, creates a tension between order and chaos that never lapses into either, but offers suggestive fragments of an alternate

conception of the world—it is sensory and perceived only when one is fully listening to the phenomenal world. As Melba Cuddy-Keane puts it, “the effort is to perceive a pattern in ‘worldly sound’ rather than to create a humanly constructed pattern” (87). This idea of another form of coherence and composition that still retains within it gaps and flux symbolizes both the new prose of the modern artist and a new relationship between humans and the environment. It is made of sounds both mechanical (“mowing,” “the squeak of a wheel”) and organic (“a bark,” “a bleat,” “the hum of an insect,” “the jar of a dorbeetle”) as well as the sounds of products of both human and natural making (“the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging”). When war and grief have shattered forms of traditional knowledge—the assurance of Mr. Ramsay’s brand of hierarchical and human-centered philosophy—humans are left to listen to the phenomenal environment. Humans stop positing, and begin questioning. The lapse into silence isn’t failure; it is merely the newness of exercising unused sensory muscles. It represents the struggle to find words that go to the depths of our emotions and most profoundly disturbing revelations of human fragility. Woolf depicts a hitherto unperceived reality that exists beyond but not completely outside of human experience. Merleau-Ponty associates artistic process with the effort of “bringing truth into being” so that the inner experience of sensation is made visible. He asserts that ecophenomenology “is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being” (*Phenomenology* xxiii). The effort of rendering physical instinct and emotion into a visible representation is always an act of translation, and it is the effort of transference, imperfect and fluctuating rather than direct and comprehensive, that best expresses the

polymorphous state of being. Or, as Merleau-Ponty explains this link between inner sensation and outward sign in another book, “the tactile palpitation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which the palpitation of the eye is a remarkable variant” (*Visible* 133). Expressing one’s vision through art is one way to communicate the complexities of embodied experience through the medium of hand and eye. This is the new perception that Lily also strives to make visible in her abstract painting of Mrs. Ramsay.

Upon returning to the Ramsay summer home after war and death have intervened Lily has difficulty identifying and articulating her feelings: “What did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all” (149). But what might be taken for an evacuation of sensation actually anticipates Lily’s own journey towards illumination, her own voyage to the lighthouse. Her memories, the figure of Mrs. Ramsay, and the significance of the lighthouse, both as a symbol and an actual journey towards a specific place, must be filtered through the sensations she feels standing on the lawn where she stood ten years ago and where now she watches the progress of James’ long-promised trip to the lighthouse. Lily makes her first effort to put brush to canvas:

The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it—a third time. And so pausing and flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? (161-62)

The first three rhythmical strokes of her brush resemble the three strokes of the lighthouse. The “nervous lines” connote both painting and writing, linking Woolf’s creative efforts with Lily’s. The pauses, blank spaces and “hollow” of the waves have their place in the pattern of the whole in which “all were related.” The rhythm of the prose loosely suggests a pattern of cohesion with alliteration (“pauses were one part,” “brown running nervous lines”) and repeated grammatical endings (“lightly and swiftly pausing striking,” “no sooner settled there than they enclosed”). The metaphor of the waves makes Lily part of the experience of those in the boat, too; they are alone, parted by growing distance, but still connected to her in sight and thought. Dipping into her color palette, Lily saturates herself in embodied perception:

She began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. (163)

Lily is directly reacting to the surrounding environment. She is “looking at the hedge” which “dictated to her” the movements of her hand. She doesn’t create the hedge on her canvas; rather, the hedge makes itself known to her so that she can be caught in the current of ambient life around her and learn how to express it. The outer world is not the product of her own conscious thought; instead, it is what inspires her thought and action. As Doyle notes, this form of artistic expression differs from the style of previous generations: “Art herein ‘takes its place among the things it touches’ and, in this way more than any other, art is political. Redefining art in this way, Lily and Woolf avoid the Romantic model of art-making in which the artist engages in materiality only to

transcend it” (65). Contrary to the art of the Romantics, Lily’s embodied perception guides her art. She gives expression to the latency that had been “nothing” she could translate, rendering it visible. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty uses Proust to describe how the “little phrase” of remembered music is “only ‘bare values substituted for the mysterious entity he had perceived, for the convenience of his understanding’” (*Visible* 150). The full complexity of the idea it represents is necessarily veiled, which “give[s] us the assurance that the ‘great unpenetrated and discouraging night of our soul’ is not empty, is not ‘nothingness’; [. . .] The carnal texture [of other invisible presences] presents to us what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing” (*Visible* 150-51). For Lily, the hollows of the wave, the invisible presence of Mrs. Ramsay, and the silent ambient world are “a negativity that is not nothing.” They animate her hand and she creates shapes from their impulses. Difficult to articulate, more felt than understood, they nonetheless form the basis of the outwardly visible creation of her painting. Merleau-Ponty aids our understanding of how the painting paints itself within her:

We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us. The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must ‘dash on his bow’ to follow it. And these open vortexes in the sonorous world finally form one sole vortex in which the ideas fit in with one another. (*Visible* 151)

As with Mrs. McNab’s song in “Time Passes,” sound and sight are part of a shared sensory engagement with the environment. What one produces, either intellectually or

physically, is a visible register not of one's own sole accomplishment, but of how the multiple forces of the ecophenomenological field filter "through" the instrument of our being. Whether music, painting, or prose, the creative act is achieved in concert with the "invisible" dictates of the ecophenomenological world.

In terms of grief and loss, this understanding is transformative. If the bringing into being of an experience relies on the presence of what isn't there—the kinetic energy of absence—to give form and substance to what remains, then even death is part of life's energy. Lily's body registers her grief, but also shows how it can make Mrs. Ramsay's memory gain in meaning and significance:

How could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty.) It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly extremely unpleasant. To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain [. . .] Oh, Mrs. Ramsay! she called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again. [. . .] Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a center of complete emptiness. (181-82).

The steps, the chair, and the puppy are all part of what draws attention to the figure that is no longer there. Visible and invisible mingle through the perceiving artist's body. The "curves and arabesques" are suggestive of not only painted arcs demarcating the boundaries of blank space and painted object, but also handwriting that curves and loops to form words. These lines demarcate emptiness, but the blank space also allows the viewer to see the marks. They both work together. Emptiness and death are infused with memory, creating the upsurge of life. There is something palpable in the hollows left

behind that actually produces signification. In this regard, death is the “secret blackness” that makes life significant (*Visible* 150).

This may not be the response the characters desired to find in their repeated questioning of what makes life worthwhile or whether their life has meaning, but it is an answer Lily’s experience offers her. She contemplates the surprising paradox of momentary permanence:

The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying ‘Life stand still here’; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. (165)

Lily recognizes that the illuminations of truth, like the lighthouse beams that pulse in and out of sight, are ephemeral revelations. There is no single, lasting truth, but a series of flickering moments that offer meaning for our lives. Daily experience is the great revelation meekly waiting to be recognized.

This acknowledgement, far from causing Lily despondency, offers a more positive interpretation of the “somethingness” inherent in the “nothingness” of darkness or silence. Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay’s silences and praises the potential of the unknown, the expressiveness of feeling that isn’t neatly captured in human discourse:

Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren’t things spoiled then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren’t we more expressive thus? The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment” (175).

This “lack” of sound, this silent hollow, is full of meaning. The richness of silent experience may even be “spoiled” by reducing it to a visible or auditory communication. The text moves back and forth between times when characters yearn for someone to speak—Mrs. Ramsay with her husband at points, Lily with Augustus Carmichael on the lawn—and other moments when the characters prefer a silence nevertheless replete with understanding. The parenthetical “(it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side)” encapsulates a thought that does not directly participate in the sentence it is within, enacting a kind of alternative aside that replicates the potential of what may not be communicated directly. Similarly, Lily encapsulates a bubble of silence in the earth itself, covering it in a hole hollowed out in the sand: “The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment.” This gesture has connotations of both death and life embedded within it. The verb “bury” might make the act an effort to inter the revelation, but the word “fertile” competes with it. Suddenly the burial becomes a planting, the seed of an idea about the power of silence and uncertainty as a promise of potential.

The novel’s final pages insist on multiplicity as a type of truth. Distance and one’s situated perspective become crucial to understanding the “whole” or full meaning of a moment, person, or object. Both distance and subjective perspective are embodied perceptions: “The relations between things or aspects of things hav[e] always our body as their vehicle” (*Phenomenology* 373). Our body’s situatedness in relation to the world allows us to know how distance and perspective function: “Lily stepped back to get her

canvas—so—into perspective” (175). Lily creates distance between herself and her painting to see it more clearly. Woolf’s prose also enacts this process as the dashes create distance between the two halves of the sentence, the “so” in the center representing the moment Lily’s clarity coalesces. Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay gazing out to the sea asking, ““Is it a boat? Is it a cork?”” (174). Mrs. Ramsay, as one should now expect, desires to identify accurately what she sees as a fixed solid object. Lily’s memory at this moment also invokes another kind of perspective—her perspective through time. Remembering this moment as she herself is standing at the water’s edge—taking note of the progress of the boat containing Mr. Ramsay, James, Cam, and the fishing boy, which appears small against the horizon—makes Mrs. Ramsay’s statement anticipate the present moment that Lily recalls her into. She and Lily are in the same place, noting the same sensation. Perspective and distance are not just a matter of space, but also a matter of time. Yet in contrast to Lily’s revelations concerning momentary truth, Mrs. Ramsay wanted to know if what she saw was one thing or the other—which is true and which is false. But the section’s third example of distance and perspective replaces objective truth with subjective truth. James is also contemplating his past desire to see the lighthouse with his present approach as he finally nears the monument that had so occupied his imagination as a child:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now—

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. (189)

As James gets closer to the lighthouse, both through time and through distance, he perceives it differently. From the far-away and nostalgic perspective, the lighthouse has appeared another animate being gazing at him, but now, in the present moment of his educated, older self, he sees the close-up details that render it more concrete and less idealized. Unlike his mother's desire to determine if what she saw was a cork or a boat, James affirms that an object can be more than one thing. Moving to a different place, either in time or space, allows us to know more about the subject. It doesn't deny the prior understanding, but contributes to it, ultimately multiplying the subject's meaning and significance. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "We do not think then that the dichotomy of Being and Nothingness continues to hold when one arrives at the descriptions of nothingness sunken into being. [. . .] Could we not express this simply by saying that for the intuition of being and the intuition of nothingness must be substituted a *dialectic*?" (*Visible* 89). To know what the lighthouse means does not require choosing between the physical presence of its "being" in the present and the "nothingness" of its felt atmosphere that was his past perception of it. Indeed, it is an entity only recognized in the tension of dialectic that sustains both understandings. In a similar fashion, Woolf has continued to re-work and re-imagine the lighthouse as a reoccurring symbol throughout the novel. The lighthouse's ability to carry multiple meanings for multiple characters doesn't negate its effectiveness, but rather enriches its power to communicate a variety of emotions to the reader.

A variety of revisions allows us to gain a deeper appreciation of not only objects, but also people. Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay from multiple perspectives in an effort to

understand her better: “There must be people who disliked her very much, Lily thought [. . .] People who thought her too sure, too drastic. Also her beauty offended people probably” (198). Lily’s indulgence in a variety of imagined perspectives doesn’t diminish Mrs. Ramsay as much as round her out so she is seen from all sides, the light and the dark. She does this when considering Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s marriage too: “But it would be a mistake, she thought, thinking how they walked off together, arm in arm, past the greenhouse, to simplify their relationship. It was no monotony of bliss—she with her impulses and quicknesses; he with his shudders and glooms” (202). Indeed, the idea of sustained perfection is a “monotony” and a reduced “simplif[ication]” of the truth, which must admit a more nuanced and fluctuating existence. Although it might expose something “dark” to acknowledge that the marriage has had its difficulties and disappointments, those perspectives are necessary to complete the picture of the Ramsays and to reach a full understanding of the “truth” of their lives together. Mr. Bankes’ comments on Lily’s initial attempt at the painting in the first section of the novel points towards this process: “A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light there required a shadow there” (56 emphasis added). Forms that are more abstract than concrete, which balance light with shadow, are the very forms Lily is after; they are the most expressive. Indeed, these are also the techniques Woolf employs in her modernist prose.

To take Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective as the main or singular viewpoint of the novel is reductive and obscures the work’s larger significance. Julia Briggs argues that “Mrs. Ramsay has struggled to make ‘Time stand still,’ to create pools of tranquility in the

midst of flux, and for this she will be remembered by her children, by Lily in her painting and by the novel itself, for the art of holding back time's swift foot, the recurrent theme of Shakespeare's sonnets, belongs as much to Mrs. Ramsay as it does to the artist Lily Briscoe or the novelist Virginia Woolf" (174). While this perspective is certainly one of the prominent views voiced in the novel and Briggs's analysis of it is insightful, the quote suggests that it is the primary attitude endorsed by the work as a whole. Yet Woolf presents Mrs. Ramsay's desire to make life and love forever happy or to make an object "stand still" as an outdated mode of thinking that gets reworked as the novel culminates in a wider proliferation of meanings. Lily's perspective of multiplicity, in concert with James and possibly even the silent artist, Mr. Carmichael, is at least equally persistent. The impulses of stasis and flux interact dialectically. However, as I have shown, the novel moves toward the revelation that joy is temporal and truths are multiple. Uncertainty—the twisting together of various fibers that never settle into one fixed meaning—is relished. As in "Time Passes," the fissures in language throughout the novel admit life and the potential of new meanings that reside in what is left unsaid. As the novel progresses, the kaleidoscopic angles on various themes fall into new patterns. They gain in vitality. Flux isn't merely the moving sea within which humans drown; it nurtures the very beginnings of human life in its most basic forms and carries humans along in its current.

When Lily makes the final stroke on her canvas, she is no longer concerned with the likelihood that the finished piece will be forgotten. Instead, what gives it value is her

own experience in creating it, the effort it produced, the journey she took in recording her sensations:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (211)

The vision is her own. It doesn't need to be valued by others to have value for her. The "attempt at something" matters, not the thought "it would be destroyed." Her vision is momentary, but she is alert for it. She is "recalled" into her body and her work by some outside stimuli and achieves unity in a match-like flash of intense illumination. The line in the center of the short declarative sentence "There it was—her picture" expresses the brief, concentrated force of her inspiration. Her impulse to finish by "dr[a]w[ing] a line there, in the center" is replicated in the horizontal dash in the center of the sentence. The "line" once again connotes the shared project of painting and writing. Part of the reader's pleasure is in the teeming potential of the "line" that unifies the work. Its significance is uncertain. Does it represent the upright line of a tree, which Lily visualized in the tablecloth during the first scene? Is it Mrs. Ramsay? Does the line's presence through the center of the painting indicate that unification is found through acknowledging division? Does it symbolize the lighthouse that radiates from the center of the novel?¹¹ Perhaps, as James discovers, it is all this and more. That multiplicity of significance gives it a meaning that is uncertain and yet more complete than any single answer. The idea of interconnection extends to the generations of readers who come after Woolf, with their

own subjective perspectives. The uncertainty of the concluding image in *To the Lighthouse* challenges readers to have their own personal moments of vision—we must contribute to the ongoing meaning of Lily’s final stroke and of Woolf’s novel as a whole. This is what makes the text live on.

Notes

1. Writing in 2000, Hermione Lee describes the current interest in representations of community as it has evolved from prior conceptions that focused more narrowly on assumptions of her privilege: “Given the prolonged class emphasis (dating from the 1930s) of Woolf as an elitist, narcissistic or neurotically individualistic writer, her passionate desire for a shared, common ground of conversation between readers and writers has taken some time to be recognized” (“Virginia Woolf’s Essays” 95-96).
2. Virginia Woolf was a prominent figure in what has become known as “the Bloomsbury Group”—Leonard Woolf’s 1960 list includes Vanessa and Clive Bell, Adrian and Karin Stephen, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, E.M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Roger Fry, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy, and later Julian, Quentin, and Angelica Bell and David Garnett (Lee *Virginia Woolf* 259)—but it would be a mistake to lump all of these intellectuals together under any one perspective. Although they generally all prioritized aesthetics, their intimacy was often allowed them to passionately debate wide differences of opinion. For example, Virginia Woolf was skeptical of Clive Bell’s views on the deterioration of civilization (Lee *Virginia Woolf* 263-64), chastised Maynard Keynes for his opulence (Lee *Virginia Woolf* 267), and argued with Fry about forms of art and fiction (Lee *Virginia Woolf* 284-85). Additionally, while Woolf highly valued E.M. Forster’s critical opinion of *her* work, she wasn’t always as enthusiastic about his fiction (Lee *Virginia Woolf* 268-69).
3. Jed Esty’s notes the tension between individualism and patriotism in *Between the Acts*: “Woolf uses the pageant to deflate nationalism and deflect political commitment. [. . .] And yet there are moments of communal longing and national sentiment that run against that grain” (92). What my analysis adds to Esty’s observation is that the positive potential of a larger community in Woolf’s work is often represented by inclusion of the non-human, rather than a merely cultural cohesion. For example, when Miss La Trobe is confronted with an audience that “sat staring [. . .] whose mouths opened, but no sound came” (*Between the Acts* 140), the cows “took up the burden. [. . .] The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion” (*Between the Acts* 140-41). The force that creates continuation and meaning is the non-

human presence inserting itself into the human story, the shared emotion that creates community transcends nationalism, or even humanism.

4. *Flush* sold 14,390 copies in the first six months of its release (Hussey *A to Z* 89).

5. One reviewer satirically lamented “the passing of a potentially great writer who perished for lack of an intelligent audience” (Hussey *A to Z* 89). Which was just the kind of attitude Woolf feared in a pre-publication diary entry: “I must not let myself believe that I’m simply a ladylike prattler: for one thing its not true. But they’ll all say so. And I shall very much dislike the popular success of *Flush*” (*Diary* IV:181, 10/2/33).

6. For perspectives on *Flush* that analyze the work predominately as a political allegory see Anna Snaith’s “Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.3 (2002), 614-36; Pamela Caughie’s *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*. U of Illinois P, 1991; and Susan Squire’s *Virginia Woolf and London*. U of North Carolina P, 1985.

7. For readings of *Flush* that emphasize Woolf’s depiction of animal consciousness see Craig Smith’s “Across the Widest Gulf: Nonhuman Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 48.3 (2002) 348-61; and Dan Wylie’s “The Anthropomorphic Ethic: Fiction and the Animal Mind in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* and Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*.” *ISLE*. 9.2 (Summer 2002), 115-31.

8. Although Woolf critiques Barrett-Browning as a “bad poet” (101) in her essay “Poets’ Letters,” she also accuses her circumstance as contributing to the alleged deficiencies in her work: “But it is not possible to consider what she might have done had her life been propitious—had not one half of it dwindled in a London sick-room—had not the other been exposed suddenly to the fierce Italian sun and Robert Browning” (103).

9. On what would have been Leslie Stephen’s 96th birthday, Virginia Woolf writes: “I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act)” (*Diary* III:208, 11/28/28).

10. Michael Lackey claims that Woolf rejected philosophical perspectives: “The philosopher sees a stable ontological structure behind the contingent and deceptive world of appearances, and that ontological structure is supposedly more real and more legitimate than the secondary-quality observations of non-philosophers” (Lackey 88). While that may be true regarding philosophies that rely on a separation between mind and common, embodied knowledge, Lackey overstates his position by collapsing all philosophies into a single model. As this dissertation shows, both Merleau-Ponty and Woolf break down the

opposition between consciousness and body that other philosophies take as their starting point.

11. Vanessa Bell's cover art for *To the Lighthouse* provocatively hints that Lily's line through the center of the painting might represent the lighthouse itself. Vanessa Bell's design has the lighthouse in the middle of the cover, represented by three thick vertical lines with small spaces in-between, suggesting a fluted, columnar appearance (distinct from the black and white stripes mentioned on page 189 of the novel and that wrap around the St. Ives' Godrevy lighthouse that was the novel's inspiration). Further, the top of the lighthouse does not appear on the cover; instead, radiating dots stretch to the edges of both sides of just the top fifth of the visible field, representing the beams that radiate from the light without showing the square top that holds the lamp. Rows of cresting waves comprise the bottom border. Thus, the three vertical lines of the tower-part of the lighthouse are left to represent the entire structure.

CHAPTER IV

BRUTE BEING: W.H. AUDEN

Most scholars would not readily identify Auden as a poet concerned with environmental representation. Indeed, his more anthologized early work does *not* forefront these ideas. However, questions about human and non-human relationships are prominently featured in his later poetry, which include poems exploring “Natural Linguistics” stating “Every created thing has ways of pronouncing its ownhood,” poems titled “Talking to Dogs” and “Talking to Mice,” as well as “New Year’s Greeting,” addressed to the variety of unseen microscopic life-forms that live on the body of a human host. Although some of the poems I focus on are more explicitly ecophenomenological than others, many emphasize sensory perception, explore the ethical ramifications of recognizing a confluence between all animal bodies, and treat questions of self-identity provoked by an embodied engagement with nature and the non-human. Merleau-Ponty’s theories regarding the Logos of the world are crucial, however, for analyzing Auden’s representations of the “airy vowels” and “watery consonants” verbalized by the flesh of the world.

Auden’s later work was neglected even during his own lifetime. Philip Larkin bemoaned in a 1960 title of a *Spectator* review, “What’s Become of Wystan?” (Mendelson 423). In a 1967 post-script to his friend Naomi Mitchison, who disparaged

recent revisions of some of his poems and expressed a concern that he needed to “make another jump into memorability,” Auden remonstrates, “P.S. Believe it or not, I have got better. Please *try* ‘Thanksgiving for a Habitat’” (Mendelson 478). Although Edward Mendelson’s most recent book of criticism on Auden’s later poetry may begin to reverse this trend, Auden’s legacy is still primarily confined to his early work. Reviewer Michael Hennessey notes, “There is still a widely held perception that Auden’s powers as a poet declined after he left England for America in 1939—and that the decline accelerated rapidly during the final years of his life” (564). Both the 1974 *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the more recent 2000 edition include only three poems written after 1939, “none of them written after 1952, leaving nearly twenty years of Auden’s career unrepresented” (565).

Despite Auden’s bold assertion “a culture is no better than its woods” (“Woods” 560 l.54), ecocritics have also been surprisingly disdainful of Auden’s poetry. A critical reviewer of three foundational ecocritical studies written by James McKusick, Lawrence Buell and Jonathon Bate severed Auden from the realm of environmental literature by quoting “Poetry makes nothing happen,”¹ a line from Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” and then caustically rejoined, “Ecocriticism believes otherwise” (Morrison 811). A recent anthology continues to shun Auden, using a quote from Whitman that disparages English pastoral poetry to covertly blame Auden for importing urban and urbane poetry to America: “The self-proclaimed ‘post-modernism’ of Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Richard Wilbur—sanctioned for American poetry by Auden’s move to New York in 1940—revitalized the ‘smooth walks’ and ‘trimmed

hedges” (Rasula 6). This conception of environmental poetry as focused on pristine “wilderness” is a regrettably narrow formulation of ecocritical poetry.² Even so, the conspicuousness of Auden’s depiction of unstable human systems of ordering and poetic appropriations of natural figures demonstrates his poems’ active engagement with the environment and frustrates facile labels of solipsism.

Although Auden’s canonically popular early poems such as “The Watershed,” “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and “Lullabye” are not ecocentric, they do show the gestation of values that prove fundamental to the environmental themes of his later poems. “The Watershed” (1927) begins with an indeterminate, observing “who” (*Collected Poems* 32 l.1), identified at the end of the poem as a non-human mammal “taller than the grass / ears poise before decision, scenting danger” (33 l.29-30). Employing an initially unidentified non-human animal as a framing device highlights the shared capacity for witnessing and experiencing. In “The Watershed” human and natural elements are consistently shown as participating in a common fate of pain and anxiety in response to the straggling remnants of a once thriving area. The inadvertent human visitor must “turn back again, frustrated and vexed” (33 l.20) as the wind is driven to “hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm” (33 l.27). Nonetheless “sap, un baffled rises” (33 l.28) akin to the “industry already comatose, / Yet sparsely living” (32 l.5-6). The ebullience of churning water and human workers has been replaced by slow sap and a shadow of corporate presence eking out an existence. The natural elements and human beings who lived in this place are depicted as having a shared fate, underscoring the equivalency between human and non-human. In “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938) humans are depicted as

unconscious of or willfully ignorant about significant traumatic events taking place in their midst. Inspired by paintings where individual humans are diminished in a large, active landscape, Auden notes how the “suffering”(179 l.1) of others often goes unnoticed “While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;” (179 l.4)—ideas reprised to a more ecocentric effect in Auden’s later poems. Similarly, “Lullabye” (1937) Auden’s famously human-centered poem about the nature of love and betrayal, focuses on the responsibility of a conscious being owes to an unconscious, sleeping other that will take on ecocentric registers when that other becomes non-human in later poems. “Lullabye” affirms the comforting presence of “involuntary powers” (58 l.38) of fleshly and ecological origin, hinting at later interests in the body and environment as fundamental to knowledge and feeling. Additionally, “Lullabye”’s recognition that fault still admits deep love, is a revelation that Auden will declare about humanity’s abiding affection for the places they inhabit and abandon in “Amor Loci” (1965). Thus, thematically, concepts for which Auden’s early poetry is known don’t disappear in his later poetry; rather they become more prominently ecocentric, suggesting that elements constitutive of human relationships with industry, art, divinity, and a beloved are also present in human relationships with place and non-human animals.

The marked change in Auden’s later poetry is a more profound orientation towards the body and ordinary experiences within local environments. Mendelson traces these influences to Auden’s first summer in Italy during 1948: “In place of the weightless archetypes and faculties that he had admired in Jung, in place of the daemon and the

mysterious forces, he now wrote about an ordinary human shape” (277); “The poems he wrote in Italy were the first that noticed the daily ordinariness of a place where he actually lived” (291). While Mendelson doesn’t explicitly make the connection between Auden’s developing awareness of how the perceiving body functions and his growing preoccupations with representing humans embedded in a more-than-human environment, these themes are dramatically apparent throughout the corpus of Auden’s later work.

Rainer Emig is the only literary critic who has recognized the ecological aspects of Auden’s poetry. Emig perceptively notes the limitations of early ecocritical analyses focusing on genres of wilderness writing, and helpfully reminds readers that “the very terms ‘ecology’ and ‘ecocriticism’ derive from the Greek root *oikos*, meaning household, the domestic sphere” (222). Although Emig does not connect this etymology with Auden’s “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” the definition is an apt reflection of Auden’s efforts in this poem and others to examine the parallels between built and natural environments, including both architectural forms and structures of language. Emig argues that Auden’s poetry renders nature as always a part of culture, claiming that Auden’s “images of nature are always man-made constructs” (212); I propose we should take this useful starting point one step farther. While Emig’s analysis always circles back to the conclusion that Auden’s poetry is “inevitably anthropocentric” (215) or continually “returns to a narcissistic anthropocentrism” (218), this chapter will show that although Auden’s *speakers* are often decidedly anthropocentric, his manipulation of imagery and poetics is meant to stimulate a contrasting awareness in the *reader*. Auden’s poetics minces political and natural imagery together in ways that don’t simply reconstitute

human-centered values. Instead, these poems expose the human ingredient so that the cultural constructs can be recognized and judged. This practice doesn't insist on a purification of the natural from all human artifice, but offers modulation. It develops an awareness of the ecological components of human identity using social and political metaphors to create sympathetic identification with nature. In other words, Auden uses anthropocentric imagery to coax his reader towards more ecocentric values. J. Scott Bryson, who doesn't make any mention of Auden, reproachful or otherwise, synthesizes earlier theories advanced by Gifford, Scigaj, and Buell, defining ecopoetry using three main characteristics: "ecocentrism, a humble appreciation of wildness, and a skepticism toward hyper-rationality and its resultant overreliance on technology" (7). While it would grossly oversimplify the complexity and diversity of Auden's work to label it "ecopoetry," much of his later poetry amply demonstrates all of these qualities.

Further, this project's emphasis on embodied modernism and sensory access to a larger worldly flesh is not confined to novelists but is evident in modernist poetry as well. While innovations in modernist prose rendered nature as distinct and yet still intertwined with the experiences of human characters, these prolific gaps are also inherent to poetic form. Poetry is a genre often dependent on sensory experience and shared emotion to convey meaning. The chasm between metaphorical signifier and signified is analogous to that between the visible and the invisible. Latent or "invisible" association and emotion, created by our shared experience in the world, suffuses the symbolic word with meaning.

In notes collected from some of his last lectures, Merleau-Ponty identifies poetry as a particularly apt form for environmental expression: “The philosophy of Nature needs a language that can take up Nature in its least human aspect, and which thereby would be close to poetry” (*Nature* 45). The interplay of heard rhythm, the reliance on multifarious associations that will produce layers of meaning beyond the literal words on the page, and the possibility of presenting a disruption between a human speaker’s claims and a contrasting argument made by the formal texture of the poem are elements that create the kind of language that may best “take up Nature.” What poetry can do to affirm the embodied principles of ecophenomenology is “reenact perception’s immediate relation to meaning” (Balazic 120). The prominent quality of this poetry is not the mere idea of nature as subject-matter, but rather the operation of language as it stimulates the reader to a new awareness of the environment through metaphor, juxtaposition, intertextual references, and unreliable human speakers. Recent philosophers like Mark Johnson and George Lakoff have theorized that the human mind is biologically wired to comprehend knowledge largely through metaphor: “We have a system of primary metaphors simply because we have the bodies and brains we have and because the world we live in, where intimacy does tend to correlate significantly with proximity, affection with warmth, and achieving purposes with destinations” (59). Literary metaphors replicate human cerebral patterns of organizing one’s experience in the world. As Auden himself succinctly states, “Man is an analogy-drawing animal” (“Making, Knowing and Judging” 51-52).

Like the prose of Forster and Woolf, Auden's poetry questions nature's capacity to mirror human emotion and depicts the non-human as having its own unique value revealed through sensory interaction. Auden makes use of the devices singled out as modernist techniques by Paul Peppis in "Schools, movements, manifestos" to create a new representation of nature and the non-human, including "free verse, montage, juxtaposition, intertextuality, linguistic abstraction" (29), and poetic speakers that are discredited by the argument inherent in the form of the poem itself. Literary devices that enhance identification with the non-human complement other techniques that insert uncertainty or highlight the artifice of literary characterization. The link between engendering human empathy for the non-human environment and appreciating distinctive non-human value in nature and other animals may seem paradoxical. Yet the bond of empathy, or even anthropomorphism, cultivates a respect for commonalities shared between all living beings while formal properties of disruption forestall an objectification or idealization of the non-human other.

Perhaps not coincidentally, both Forster and Woolf were influential to Auden's work. Auden's admiration for his friend Forster is expressed in a poem dedicated to the older writer, which includes several of Forster's fictional characters. In the last poem of his "Sonnets from China" (1938) sequence, Auden references Forster characters who want to do the right thing but often make a muddle of it: Lucy from *A Room With A View*, Turton, who sets up the failed "bridge" party in *A Passage to India*, and Philip from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. The speaker identifies with these characters, depicted as mischievous children, or perhaps as humanists who haven't yet recognized the problems

inherent in their naïve goals: “Yes, we are Lucy, Turton, Philip: we / Wish international evil, are delighted / To join the jolly ranks of the benighted / Where reason is denied and love ignored, / But, as we swear our lie, Miss Avery / Comes out into the garden with a sword” (Sonnet XXI (1938) 195 1.9-14). Their imperialistic fervor, imagined here as being “knighted” or “nighted” and kept in the dark, recalls martial honor and conquest. They are rebuked for the “lie” of glorifying “international evil” by Miss Avery, the prophetic country housekeeper of *Howards End*, who waves a sword that recalls the human sacrifice of the soldier who once owned it and Leonard Bast who died by its blade, reminding them of the higher calling of love and humility in a world of war and prejudice. Auden also invokes Forster himself: “still you speak to us, / Insisting that the inner life can pay. / As we dash down the slope of hate with gladness, / You trip us like an unnoticed stone” (195 1.3-6), critiquing dangers of over-zealous nationalism. Just as the stones in *Passage to India* cry out, preventing the immature union of Fielding and Aziz, Forster is a stone that blocks misdirected enthusiasm. Forster serves as a reminder of the kind of moral responsibility that will become a hallmark of Auden’s treatment of the non-human other.

Where Forster may have influenced Auden’s themes, Woolf seems an inspiration for Auden’s theories of form. Passages from *A Writer’s Diary*, edited by Leonard Woolf, appear frequently in Auden’s commonplace book, *A Certain World*. Several of these focus on Virginia Woolf’s struggles with the craft of writing. Auden pays homage to her by quoting Woolf in titles to two essays written on the subject of poetic form, both

referring to “Squares and Oblongs.”³ The phrase comes from Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, wherein Rhoda comments on a symphony:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it along the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (163)

The paradoxical idea of finding meaning in the negative space that is made visible by surrounding forms, “the structure [. . .] now visible; what is inchoate is here stated,” rather than in the explicit forms themselves, symbolizes the union between visible and invisible in literature. Innate sensory awareness and connections of meanings latent between the words take precedence in deciding how to place each block or phrase. The silent and subtle effects of solid shapes and letters are significant for Woolf and Auden. They notice negative spaces, and the animate possibilities of other life-forms that many overlook.

Like Forster and Woolf, Auden seemed to believe that knowledge of natural science and daily encounters with the land and other species were necessary components of a writer’s life. Auden’s list of five requirements for a “college bards” curriculum includes: “Every student would have to select three courses out of courses in mathematics, natural history, geology, meteorology, archaeology, mythology, liturgics, cooking; Every student would be required to look after a domestic animal and cultivate a garden plot” (“The Poet and The City” 77). Auden’s own training follows this formula. His scientific proclivities, his extensive knowledge of particular flora and fauna, as well

as the time he spent getting to know local environs and observing creatures that shared his home, shape the themes of his later poetry.

Subversive Natural Science and the Human Subject

W.H. Auden's life-long friend and collaborator, Christopher Isherwood, declared in "Some Notes on Auden's Early Poetry" that a reader of that poetry should know "First, that Auden is essentially a scientist" (10). Like many modern writers, Auden's perspectives on self-identity and the relationship between humans and the natural world were informed by advances in physics, biology and psychoanalysis. Auden acknowledged that the life sciences profoundly affect his artistic vocation in "The Poet and the City": "Physics, geology and biology have now replaced this everlasting universe with a picture of nature as a process in which nothing is now what it was or what it will be" (78). Auden's later poetry exacerbates the tension between science's claims to objective knowledge and its depiction of an inchoate world in perpetual flux. Several late poems that are rarely anthologized or critically analyzed, including "Bestiaries Are Out," "Et in Arcadia Ego," "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics," and "Ode to Terminus," disrupt any anthropomorphic certainty that science claims to reveal by employing scientific rhetoric for the purposes of undermining scientific presumptions of control. These poems create a lexicon of scientific systems but combat their own hermeneutics by slipping towards the opposite binary in any dialectic the poem presents,

whether it be scientific order versus organic chaos, human observer versus non-human subject, or poetic imagination versus scientific fact.

In the poem “Bestiaries Are Out” (1964), which ostensibly examines the evolution of our knowledge about bees, Auden interrogates the practice of personification and its limits through scientific analogy: “We sought from study of their hives / To draw some moral for our lives” (739 l.12). The title refers to medieval works known as bestiaries which allegorized the appearances or habits of animals. “Bestiaries Are Out” suggests such fables are outmoded and no longer suited to the more enlightened and objectively scientific modes of understanding the world. An ecocritical reading adds another gloss to the title—that what it means to be animal, or “beast,” escapes the safe categorical boundary that has been presumed to separate humans from other non-human animals. Indeed, the formal aspects of the poem stridently resist the speaker’s efforts to rationally distance humans from animals⁴: “Now bestiaries are out, for now / Research has demonstrated how / They actually behave, they strike us / as being horridly unlike us” (739 l.17-20). The break in the enjambed line isolates “for now,” inserting the idea of temporal uncertainty. The words “behave” and “being” audibly play on the words “behive” and “bee-ing.” Further, the use of pairs of rhyming couplets throughout the stanzas and the exact word repetition in this couplet, “us” and “us,” formally contradict the differences the speaker asserts.

Philosophy and literature articulate a struggle that has particular poignancy for the modernist era: the unsettling awareness that the very point where contrast is established through brushing against another entity is, at the same time, a point of connection through

coming into shared experience with the other, whether it be through colonialism, a burgeoning global market, increased world tourism, or mass communication.

Specifically, the moment of contact with the non-human other both marks a boundary of difference and creates a surface of exchange that blurs demarcations between separate entities: “The body stands before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace. And between these two vertical beings, there is not a frontier, but a contact surface” (*Visible* 271). In the first half of the twentieth century new understandings of particle and wave theory, evolutionary biology and the breakdown of traditional belief systems challenged fundamental assumptions about human control over nature. As we’ve seen with Forster and Woolf, modernist literary innovations also broke down customary symbolic uses of natural imagery that had heretofore affirmed pastoral ideology or established a mimetic subservience of nature to humans. In Auden’s poetry, confronting a non-human environment no longer fettered by human desire or scientific control provokes disturbing revelations of both alienation and kinship.

Rather than reinforcing human superiority over nature, Auden’s invocation of progress and science in “Bestiaries Are Out” becomes a tool for exposing human ignorance about how those same rules, when applied to the species *homo sapiens*, uncover human failings. The conflation of human and non-human occurs both through the personification of the bees and the zooification of humans, presented here as “Urban Man” (739 l.22) becoming insect. While the speaker flatly denies that “Urban Man” might be made into an insect through consumerism and drugs, the regular four-foot iamb

is haltingly disrupted by the speaker's "No" (739 l.25). As a result, the continued claim to difference and superiority, not the idea of identification between human and insect, is what disrupts the poem's order.

In the poem's two concluding stanzas, the speaker attempts to strip away familiar devices of personification that compare humans to non-humans:

How, for us children of the word,
 Anthropomorphic and absurd
 To ask what code they satisfy
 When they swoop out to sting and die,

Or what catharsis undergo
 When they put on their biggest show,
 A duel to the death between
 A tooting and a quacking Queen. (740 l.29-36)

Paradoxically, the effort to discard a search for "codes" that merely satisfy humans' own quest for logic and meaning persistently comes back to the very questions that humans ask themselves about the larger significance of life. To hypothesize what purpose bees fulfill when they "swoop out to sting and die" or interrogate the ultimate advancement of monarchies that are cyclically toppled and overthrown is to ask the fundamental question related to the significance of human existence, both individually and as a society. The analogy between humans and bees isn't quite the pathetic fallacy the speaker assumes; rather there is some verification of the human-apiary kinship in the very terms of its imagining. We know ourselves through the non-human other. The theatrical connotations of "catharsis" and "show" emphasize the act of assuming the role of another being. The desire to inscribe separation—to imagine any kinship as "absurd"—only heightens the fear of our own animal instincts and drives. Thus, the categories that

humans create ultimately divulge more about human beings than about the “lesser” animals the speaker claims superiority over.

Auden elaborates an inextricable relationship between humans and non-humans through his technique of undercutting the viability of imposed systems of control. In “Et in Arcadia Ego” (1964), humans have presumably tamed the wild into a cultivated garden state: “Her jungle growths / are abated, Her exorbitant / Monsters abashed” (724 l.7-9). But subsequent lines subvert the connotations of good and evil as well as the role of aggressor and victim: “I well might think myself / A humanist, / Could I manage not to see [. . .] The farmer’s children / tiptoe past the shed / Where the gelding knife is kept” (725 l.28-30, 34-36). Humans are the ones performing monstrous acts of castration. Moreover, castration aligns the abhorred sexuality with what is “natural” and insinuates that society’s efforts to thwart that innate, embodied desire are actually what constitute the sinful behavior. By pointing out that humans strive to construct and control nature, Auden accentuates the reader’s awareness of how society divests nature of its own independent beauty or authority. Further, as in the poem quoted above, Auden’s work suggests that humans themselves exhibit the very traits of bestiality and violence social and scientific order proclaim they have excised. Auden subversively portrays the human animal as having more similarity with than difference from other non-human animals.

Auden’s “Prologue at Sixty” (1967) underscores the existence of a reciprocal relationship between humans and non-humans as an aging speaker contemplates forest landscapes tamed by warring factions and modern technology, and layers of European history that provide a background for New York City in 1967. Auden consciously

invokes personification and anthropomorphism to heighten the reader's awareness of how human perspectives impose themselves on natural subjects. In this poem, a canine cosmonaut "blinked at our sorry conceited O" (831 l.92). The "O" takes on the connotations of a microcosmic planetary globe as seen by the astronaut-dog; the solipsistic enclosed human mind that threatens the future of the planet; the mortal zero-value of every individual, including the speaker, that human conceit—"our sorry conceited O"—attempts to mask; and a blank face of human gullibility characterized by a slack "O"-shaped mouth and wide vacuous eyes—the titular political "Heads who are not all there" (831 l.100). This cluster of images pointing towards the cultural and political history of human arrogance, conquest, and destruction is directly juxtaposed with the refocusing acuity of the dog's blink. The dog's position of the surveying glance presents a similar reversal of traditional roles of the observer and the observed. In terms of ecophenomenology, an openness to being on the part of the perceiver is a precursor to truly understanding the perceived subject: "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is *of* it, unless [. . .] he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them—he who is one of them" (Merleau-Ponty *Visible* 134-35). Thus, animals gain potential for sentience as humans become animals to be examined. Poems such as these offer to teach something to the sciences, namely that no perspective is objective; all knowledge is situated and contextualized from one's subjective experience and desires. The scope of human history appears small and mean from a non-human, global vantage point.

The wisdom of humanity's insatiable desire to discover and master the non-human world, from the tiniest atomic particles to the farthest reaches of the cosmic continuum is questioned in "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics" (1961). The first lines, "If all a top physicist knows / About the truth be true" (740 1.1-2) describes truth and knowledge as a circular, self-reflexive axiom at best, "If [. . .] truth be true." Merleau-Ponty explains how scientific knowledge often fails to account for the instability of systems by offering totalizing theories: "Physics should not be conceived as a search for the truth, it should give up determining a real physics [. . .] Formalist physics receives all freedom, but it loses its ontological content. It signifies no mode of being, no reality" (*Nature* 95-96).⁵ Similarly, the poem's vague reference to "all the so-and-so's" deflates knowledge to a forgettable, nonsensical absurdity. Humanity's childish desire to cling to a reality that can be mastered by scientific knowledge is disturbed by the division between learned explanation and personal experience. Consequently, humans choose to discard embodied knowledge in favor of sources that are presumed to be more authoritative. The rhyme scheme of the poem itself resists the comfort of predictable patterns; each stanza contains eight lines, four of which rhyme with another four lines in the stanza, but the order of the rhyming lines is different in every stanza. The central argument of the poem in stanzas five and six interrogates whether factual knowledge of extremes serves any purpose in our daily lives or whether its pursuit is more harmful than edifying:

The passion of our kind
 For the process of finding out
 Is a fact one can hardly doubt,
 But I would rejoice in it more

If I knew more clearly what
 We wanted the knowledge for,
 Felt certain still that the mind
 Is free to know or not.

It has chosen once, it seems,
 And whether our concern
 For magnitude's extremes
 Really become a creature
 Who comes in median size,
 Or politicizing Nature
 Be altogether wise,
 Is something we shall learn. (741 l.33-48)

The previous stanzas' references to mundane routines such as kissing, shaving and an appreciation of habitable space suggest the farcical application of atomic knowledge and cosmic science to an embodied experience of daily life. In his *Secondary Worlds* lectures, Auden touches upon this theme more literally: "The only real world which is 'real' for us, as in the world in which all of us, including scientists, are born, work, love, hate, and die, is the primary phenomenal world as it is and always has been presented to us through our senses" ("Words and the Word" 144).⁶ Yet, the refusal of science to value embodied perception creates a tension between the value of knowledge and the value of life.

The theme of this poem doesn't discredit science generally as much as it questions the hidden agendas science might obscure. "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics" strikes a tragic note by linking the application of atomic fission or cosmic expansion to a lexicon of violence; "pelt"(740 l.11), "break" (740 l.16), and "explode" (741 l.30), as well as an image of the aftermath of violence, "indeterminate gruel" (741 l.23) all recall the destructive potential of knowledge to harm living bodies,

particularly in times of war. Auden is concerned about “what / We want the knowledge for,” suggesting that science can be misappropriated or divested of its ambiguity for political gain.

The trepidation contained in the final stanzas is produced by the uneasy mixture of theology and physics. Auden’s speaker seems like Milton’s Adam warning Eve against desiring knowledge that doesn’t concern them and might disrupt their daily bliss. Earlier references to “Thank God” (741 l.21) and “architects” (741 l.28) who “enclose / a quite euclidian space” (741 l.28-29) subtly allude to a garden state. The last stanza’s claim that “it,” the mind, “has chosen once” (741 l.42) before, recalls the choice that resulted in a fall from grace. As in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the poem insinuates that humanity’s insatiable lust for knowledge is inevitable. As the speaker asserts a desire to be assured “still that the mind / Is free to know or not” (741 l.39-40), the very freedom of choice is rejected in the homophone “know” which becomes audibly indistinguishable from “no,” making the seeming dialectical opposites collapse into a singular negation of choice—“no” and “not.” The poem assumes that humans will learn from the ominous consequences of their overreaching, even as it argues for caution and limitation. Science, the poem warns, should not be pursued in a detached manner for its own sake, but rather constantly assessed in the context of moral and ethical consequences for the life of other humans and the larger “garden” of human stewardship. Forster’s and Auden’s mutual concerns about moral responsibility and property rights form one of the important environmental links between them. Both were attentive to the ethical strictures inherent in caring for land that other animals also shared. Mendelson underscores the ethical

bonds that linked Auden with the non-human inhabitants of his land: “Auden’s responsibility for three acres put him, he believed, under the same obligations that scientists, and those who defer to their authority, prefer to ignore” (445). This admonition of kinship with all living beings eviscerates a solipsistic “objectivity” that only concerns itself with the existence of others as it can be exploited for human glory or power.

“Ode to Terminus” (1968) also counsels responsible restraint and compares the scientist with the poet. As Ranier Emig has noted, “‘Ode to Terminus’ argues in favor of accepting limits and using them to cope with existence” (174). The first stanza of the poem – “The High Priests of telescopes and cyclotrons / keep making pronouncements about happenings / on scales too gigantic or dwarfish / to be noticed by our native senses” (809 l.1-4) – associates science with an aggressively dogmatic faith and reprises the discrepancy between scientific phenomena and the experience of everyday life. The poem asserts that the “elegant / euphemisms of algebra” are “too symbolic of the crimes and strikes and demonstrations / we are supposed to gloat on at breakfast” (809 l.14-16), suggesting that scientific achievement incapable of verification by the common person is too often affiliated with nationalist causes, allowing science to become mere propaganda. For Auden, no perspective is objective; all knowledge is situated and contextualized by political discourse.

Thus, the poem exposes science as another kind of cultural construction. Science relies on images and languages through which we know and understand the world even when it goes against humans’ daily sensory experience of the lived environment: “scales

too gigantic or dwarfish / to be noticed by our native senses.” The poem’s concerns are necessarily based on an appreciation of the body’s centrality to human knowledge: “The very notion of scale is an absolutely incomprehensible notion if we do not refer to perceptual experience” (*Nature* 99). What we deem credible is determined by our degree of faith in the authority of scientific claims. In this way, both poetry and science can be misquoted or misused for rhetorical effect. The seventh stanza juxtaposes the kinds of romanticized personifications used to explain the natural world with the data provided by physics, contrasting sunlight represented as a “Sun-Father” (810 l.25) whose “light is felt as a friendly presence” (810 l.27) with an understanding of the sun’s rays as a type of “photonic bombardment” (810 l.28). Both are constructed models for reality—one a romantic simile that figuratively imagines the sun in terms of human relations, and the other a construct produced by science, which doesn’t comport with humans’ daily lived experience of sunlight. The poem goes so far as to claim that humanity’s need to create meaning through language doesn’t justify human superiority, but rather puts humans outside of the more natural harmony of the rest of the ecologic world: “where to all species *except the talkative* / have been allotted the niche and diet that / become them” (810 l.33-35, emphasis added). What redeems humanity then is an acknowledgment of boundaries, both linguistic and scientific, that allow us to discern truth and meaning. To discard “rhythm, punctuation, metaphor” leads to babble that “sinks into driveling monologue, / too literal to see a joke or / distinguish a penis from a pencil” (l.41-44). Or one might add, playing on the pun, to distinguish a phallus (biological) from a fallacy (the written interpretations of human power through science and art). The formal

technique allows the astute reader to get the joke and apprehend its significance through conscious formal structures. Pauses of punctuation and the boundaries of rhythm and metaphor promote meaning through limitation.

The poem's final remonstrance claims that science has been deployed to justify a self-serving, gluttonous exploitation that must be similarly checked:

In this world our colossal immodesty
has plundered and poisoned, it is possible /
 You still might save us, who by now have
 Learned this: that scientists, to be truthful,
must remind us to take all they say as a
tall story, that abhorred in the Heav'ns are all
 self-proclaimed poets who, to wow an
 audience, utter some resonant lie. (811 l.57-64)

These stanzas recreate the sensation of uncontrolled abandon: each line is enjambed and the auditory lack of rhyme as well as the visual placement of the lines on the page replicates a jarred sense of discordance and imbalance. The poetic powers of creation are akin to the scientific imagination; both must evidence some exercise of self-restraint in order to be effective. Either one can tell a "tall story" uttered with a rhetorical or political flourish, concealing truth rather than revealing it. The poet and the scientist are equally capable of poorly crafted lies if they do not remain attentive to whether the form adheres to the theme and whether the act or deed has a worthy purpose. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy locates the origins of scientific myth-making in a misplaced acceptance of Cartesian dualisms and undisclosed emotional motivations: "Science is not an unmotivated instance. We have to psychoanalyze science, purify it. [. . .] Moreover, science still lives in part on a Cartesian myth. [. . .] Its concept of Nature is often only an idol to which the scientist makes sacrifices, the reasons for which are due more to

affective motivations than to scientific givens” (*Nature* 85). Auden’s insistence on an awareness of embodied knowledge rejects the Cartesian divisions erected by science. However, Auden also expresses latent distrust of any language that makes truth claims. He inserts a suspicion that science doesn’t reflect the full, textured richness of human experience through its objective impersonality. Both science and literature are powerful and provocative translations of human experience while ultimately still merely interpretations of the embodied relationship between humans and the non-human world.

Auden’s contemporaries chastised him for “turn[ing] his back on the left-wing views they believed him to have espoused in the thirties” or implying that “civilization [. . .] requires well-educated , sophisticated, and witty human beings [. . .] who devote themselves [. . .] to an effete art in which form and verbal play outweigh content” (Bahlke 14). Similarly, more recent critics still focus on what they believe to be a “growing commitment to the individual and to the personal life” (Bahlke 14) in Auden’s later work. While Auden’s “scientific” methodologies may create a sense of detachment in his speakers, it is equally important to be cognizant of the way his work critiques the supposed objectivity of the scientific gaze. An ecocritical reading of Auden’s poetic treatment of science reveals a profound involvement with the larger world, particularly the social and ethical ramifications of scientific knowledge. Thus, if we take seriously Isherwood’s claim that Auden is “essentially a scientist” (10), we should consider him as a highly skeptical practitioner whose artistic experiments often resist facile scientific facts and reveal humans as brute animals to be examined.

Talking Animal

Auden's conviction that human knowledge must be tempered with ethical responsibility is also evident in his poems about non-humans. In the essay "The Virgin and The Dynamo," Auden explains that a lack of personal accountability is created when non-human presences are given a god-like mask that absolves humans of responsibility for their actions. Auden further states that the inverse situation is also true; humans often efface unique aspects of the ecological other, particularly non-human animals, in an effort to evade moral obligations:

By nature we tend to endow with a face any power which we imagine to be responsible for our lives and behavior; vice versa, we tend to deprive of their faces any persons whom we believe to be at the mercy of our will. In both cases we are trying to avoid responsibility. In the first case, we wish to say: 'I can't help doing what I do; someone else, stronger than I, is making me do it'—in the second: 'I can do what I like to N because N is a thing, an x with no will of its own.' [. . .] It is permissible, and even right, to endow nature with a real face, e.g., the face of the Madonna, for by so doing we make nature remind us of our duty towards her, but we may only do this after we have removed the pagan mask from her, seen her as a world of masses and realized that she is not responsible for us. (63)

Here, Auden enjoins his readers to discard both anthropocentric approaches to nature, that of deification and that of human exceptionalism. Instead, he argues the proper relationship with the non-human is one that sees a "real face" of familial, biological kinship. Several poems about the earth represent nature as a "Madonna," or an originating mother deserving of human respect yet no longer responsible for the actions of a mature human species. "Ode to Gaea" (1954) proclaims that "Earth, till the end, will be Herself" (556 l.93) and "Dame Kind" (1959) labels those who may be tempted to rage against her—"...ONE BOMB WOULD BE ENOUGH... Now look / who's thinking

gruesome”—as “worse than a lonesome Peeper / or a He-Virgin / Who nightly abhors the Primal Scene / in medical Latin,” admonishing, “She mayn’t be all She might be / but She *is* our Mum” (667 l.29-36). These lines are a tacit reminder that violence is linked to a rage for order, a perverse desire to abolish the mess of sex and the uncertainty of emotions that accompany embodied participation in life.

While “Ode to Gaea” and “Dame Kind” are worthy of more detailed study, for the purposes of this project, several poems that don’t take “mother earth” as the primary subject are more effective for analyzing the poet’s responsibility for representing the lives, feelings, and experiences of other non-human beings in ways that are linguistically dexterous and thematically innervating. Building on an earlier generation of poets who advocated for changes in human attitudes towards nature by attempting to “speak a word *for* Nature” (Thoreau “Walking” 59), many of Auden’s later poems strive to work under, over and across this barrier of language, consciously questioning whether any human can ever speak “for” nature. Instead, Auden accentuates the way humanity is inextricably tangled within any lines that attempt to capture a non-human voice. While these poems aren’t “nature” poems in any straight-forward sense, they conspicuously expose how the animal is commonly regarded in human culture and literary tradition, betraying a wary stance towards generally accepted ideology. Throughout the later poems, Auden can’t resist plucking at the tension in the line that connects human and non-human interests. Yet he doesn’t reduce the problem into a neat postulate; instead he voices concerns that arise and resolve themselves in diverse forms of sympathy and alterity.

The fundamental problem of food and prey is taken up in several poems about hunting, including the early poem “Our Hunting Fathers” (1934), “The Sabbath” (1959), and perhaps most radical in its approach to this question, “Hunting Season” (1952). Auden exposed pastimes usually associated with celebrating nature as activities that more often reflect human desires for social conquest: “The ever growing popularity of hunting, fishing, and mountain climbing” have the tendency to “make the relation to Nature one of contest, the goal of which is human victory, and limit contacts with her to those of the greatest dramatic intensity” which may “exacerbate rather than cure that unnatural craving for excess and novel thrills which is the characteristic of urban disease” (Mendelson 381 quoting Auden’s Introduction to Yale Series of Younger Poets). From Auden’s perspective, the appreciation for nature that hunting and other outdoor sports supposedly inspire is hypocritical because they still require a vanquishing of the very thing they are purportedly designed to exalt. Literary homages to non-human rivals are similarly fraught with hypocrisy. As early as 1934, Auden was aware that the device of personification allowed humans to assuage guilt for killing. He revealed that the “the story” told by “Our hunting fathers” relied on seeing “In the lion’s intolerant look, / Behind the quarry’s dying glare, / Love raging for the personal glory / That reason’s gift would add” (122 l.1-8). He goes on to condemn such mirroring as artifice, marveling that man could so change the lion’s essential being: “His southern gestures modify / and make it his mature ambition / To think no thought but ours” (l.13-18). In “The Sabbath” Auden gives readers insight into the kind of tale the non-human animal might tell about the human hunter’s superiority: “Waking on the Seventh Day of Creation” the non-human

creatures, identified by their own relationship to food, warily look for the newest member of the garden: “Herbivore, parasite, predator scouted, / Migrants flew fast and far— / Not a trace of his presence: holes in the earth, Beaches covered with tar” (672, l.1, 5-8). The human effect on the environment recalls the earth itself as another body, able to be shot up, foul fluid spilled like a noxious kind of blood. Yet the animals, emboldened by the temporary absence of man, reassure themselves: “Well, that fellow had never really smelled / like a creature who would survive: / No grace, address or faculty like those / Born on the First Five” (627 l.13-16), specifically refuting the more refined qualities that humans might wish to claim set them apart from other beasts: “grace” or beauty, “address” or speech, and “faculty” or intelligence. “First Five,” referring to animals created on the first five days God created the world, also draws attention to the superior sensory abilities, or “first” five senses (there may be even more), of non-human animals. Yet, the human does return: “A rifle’s ringing crack / Split their Arcadia wide open, cut / Their Sabbath nonsense short. / For whom did they think they had been created? / That fellow was back, / More bloody-minded than they remembered, / More god-like than they thought” (l.21-28). It is the human who defiles what is “their Arcadia,” “their Sabbath.” Further, the other creatures’ “nonsense” is made so only by sheer human force—a “bloody-mind,” rather than any power of reasoning and argumentation. In this poem, it is the imagined perspective of the non-human animal that is given the greater claim to intellect while “god-like” human hierarchy is revealed to rest merely on the physical, retributive might of gun-power, more like the mythological gods’ lightening bolt than God’s laws, which the human is violating by hunting on the ordained day of rest.

“Hunting Season” (548) intermingles its human and non-human subjects, offering an *ars poetica* for the poet who aims to capture animals in verse. It is written in the pattern of ABCBDD—the same verse form as W.B. Yeats’ “Wild Swans at Coole,” a poem about a flock of swans rising into the air after being suddenly startled and reminding the speaker of a past love, and the verse form in much of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Although Dickinson’s “My life stood—a loaded gun,” a poem about the violent potential of the poet as well as the eternal life of poetry, only replicates the ABCB format in its first and last verses, the themes of “Wild Swans at Coole” and “My life stood—a loaded gun” might add to our understanding of the complex set of relationships elliptically revealed in “Hunting Season”:

A shot: from crag to crag
 The tell-tale echoes trundle;
 Some feathered he-or-she
 Is now a lifeless bundle
 And, proud into a kitchen, some
 Example of our tribe will come.

Down in the startled valley
 Two lovers break apart:
 He hears the roaring oven
 Of a witch’s heart;
 Behind his murmurs of her name
 She sees a marksman taking aim.

Reminded of the hour
 And that his chair is hard,
 A deathless verse half done,
 One interrupted bard
 Postpones his dying with a dish
 Of several suffocated fish.

Mendelson’s brief treatment of this poem elucidates one possible reading. His interpretation rests on a distinction between first person “I/Thou” and second person

“he/she” and assumes the second stanza involves a pair of human lovers hearing the distant shot. He equates the crack of the gun with a ruptured demise of emotional intimacy at the very moment of coital penetration: “The startled valley is an anatomical as well as a geographical place, and the two lovers suddenly sense the impersonal sexual hungers that drive their personal love” (365). Mendelson also presumes that the rifle shot is what “remind[s]” the poet “of the hour,” noting that “a ‘deathless verse half done’” serves as a “reminder that persons, whether first, second, or third, are not all deathless” (365). Yet this reading doesn’t adequately account for the prominent presence of the non-human animal or the poet in the poem. Moreover, it neglects the alternative reading presented in the ambiguous antecedent of “two lovers.”

Like the “tell-tale echoes” in line two, there are dual echoes in this literary tale. The earlier reference to “Some feathered he-or-she” offers a second possibility for the “two lovers” who “break apart.” While the hunter is indifferent to the identity of the felled bird, the second stanza could be read as a recounting of two hunted birds in flight. Pursuant to that reading, the male bird, knowing the shot means that they may soon be cooked and eaten, “hears the roaring oven,” and calls to his winged companion as she spots the hunter below “taking aim.” Thus the second stanza can be read as either a dangerous realization occurring between two human characters at the moment their love is physically consummated or a veiled sympathetic rendering of two avian characters, one of whom is shot and consumed. A reader has to be willing to imagine that animals may share similar feelings of peril, love, and grief in order to apprehend the second reading. The form of the poem replicates the issue of difference and similarity between humans

and non-humans as well as the motif of coupling and couples, featuring two unrhymed lines, two rhymed lines, and a final couplet in each stanza. Accordingly, “Hunting Season” allows two divergent possibilities for the same “him” or “her” couple.

The figure of the poet in the final stanza prompts the reader to examine more than one type of hidden ambiguity. As the identity of the two lovers is uncertain, the position of the poet in the poem is also indeterminate. Is he simply another person who was startled by the sound of the hunter’s rifle? Or is his writing interrupted by the chime of a clock, “Reminded of the hour,” thus leaving the reader hanging at the climax of an unfinished plot in the second stanza, “She sees a marksman taking aim”? Is his “deathless verse half done” merely temporally coincidental to the other events, or does it refer to the death left unfinished in the second stanza? The poet has a dual role that the reader must assign. The only definite quality is the stark contrast between the dramatic emotion in the second stanza and the deflated ennui of the third. Juxtaposed with the heightened intensity of the imminent death or violent romantic loss of the previous stanza, the poet insipidly complains “that his chair is hard.” His “deathless verse” gives him the power to immortalize other lives, even though the poet himself is still prey to the inevitable deterioration of all flesh and participates in killing and consuming himself by eating the meal. The word “suffocated” and the alliteration in “A dish of several suffocated fish”—the repeated “s” sound requiring the reader to force out air—implies a murderous responsibility. Pairing “suffocated” with “fish” which don’t breath air, links the hunter’s avian prey with the aquatic animals the poet consumes. It also unexpectedly combines allusions to sex, fish being a common symbol for a penis, and the violent death

of the bird prepared in the hunter's kitchen, thus once again confirming two alternate readings. Whether the victims in the second stanza are human mammals or birds, the poet is still guilty of participating in their loss and consummation, questioning whether the poet's power of immortality really sets him apart from hunters or whether the poet unconsciously shares in the tragedy of "several" deaths. Equating true suffering with a hard chair or analogizing the poet's dinner with saving a life in the phrase "postpones his dying" (it is still unclear whether the death that is postponed is the one occurring in the poet's verse or his own slow progress to the grave), makes the third stanza hyperbolic in comparison to the peril of the second verse. The poet-figure seems self-centered and ironically unaware. But the poem itself prompts the reader to be more acute than the persona of the poet. The reader is challenged to think beyond anthropocentric notions that only humans are capable of experiencing affection or fear and encouraged to recognize the multiple layers of culpability in any violent act.

Auden's concern for the poet's treatment of animals in literary contexts extends well beyond "Hunting Season." "Two Bestiaries" (1948), an essay in which he analyzes the poetry of Marianne Moore and D.H. Lawrence, classifies five different ways animals have been anthropomorphized in poetry. The beast fable, the animal simile, the animal as allegorical emblem, and the romantic encounter of man and beast offer different strategies for using the animal as a mirror for human emotions. Such treatments present the animal without any kind of accuracy in the context of their own natural history. However, Auden identifies a fifth category, animals as objects of human interest and affection that avoids a human-centered approach. Using this kind of poetic treatment, the

poet describes animals “in the same way that he would describe a friend, that is to say, every detail of the animal’s appearance and behavior will interest him” (302). While Auden acknowledges that even this method participates in anthropomorphism, it is because “it is almost impossible to make such a description communicable to others except in anthropomorphic terms” (302). Understanding each animal as an individual being establishes a shared experience—a posture of response and respect that anticipates the “*respecere*” advanced by current animal advocate Donna J. Haraway (27). The affectionate attention to “every detail of the animal’s appearance and behavior” (“Two Bestiaries” 302) is unlike other literary formulations because “the Homeric simile is reversed” so that the animal is the subject which is then compared to the human, and metaphors for an individual non-human animal may be drawn from other animals and plants, not just humans. This strategy may employ anthropomorphism, but unlike the other ways of using animals in literature, it does not participate in anthropocentrism.

In “Two Bestiaries,” Auden singles out Marianne Moore as particularly adept at allowing the reader to experience a familiar and personal relationship with her non-human subjects, but Auden’s own poetry also attempts to acknowledge animals as having distinct personalities and a particular relationship with the speaker. Indeed, personal human interactions with animals shape some of Auden’s most prominent ideas about ethical dwelling in the world. In his essay “Justice of Dame Kind” (1973) Auden draws distinctions between “a naturalist” who “studies the ways of creatures in their natural habitat and, if he interferes at all, confines his interference to establishing a personal relation with them” (459) and “Professors of animal psychology and behavioral

scientists” who “subject animals to abnormal conditions of their own contriving [. . .] those, in other words, who perform experiments on animals which they would never dream of performing on themselves or their children” (459). Endorsing the “naturalist approach,” in another essay, “Concerning the Unpredictable” (1973) Auden quotes a long passage describing Dr. Eisley’s response to a wild “fox inviting me to play”: “Gravely I arranged my forepaws while the puppy whimpered with ill-cocealed excitement. I drew the breath of a fox’s den into my nostrils. On impulse, I picked up clumsily a whiter bone and shook it with teeth that had not entirely forgotten their purpose” (473). This playful freedom, the willingness to forget decorum and act from generous instinct of inter-species exchange, delights Auden, who aligns himself with Eisley: “Neither of us can enjoy crowds and loud noises. But even introverted intellectuals can share the Carnival experience if they are prepared to forget their dignity, as Dr. Eisely did” (473). This is the kind of inspired connectivity that Auden attempts through his poetic play of inter-species communication. Both humor and theatricality, the ability to take on and imagine ourselves in other roles, are recurrent motifs in Auden’s animal poems. Yet many of these poems also critically examine the ways humans violently sever the bond between themselves and other animals, a theme that might have been influenced by the feelings of revulsion Auden experienced at witnessing the dissection of a whale carcass in Iceland. Michael Yates, Auden’s companion that day, attributes the following statement to Auden: “It gives one an extraordinary vision of the cold, controlled ferocity of the human species” (Davenport-Hines 152). Both of these poles of human

response—interspecies exchange and violent attack—are depicted in Auden’s animal poetry.

In “Talking to Dogs” (1970), “Talking to Mice” (1971), and “Talking to Myself” (1971), Auden explores a conversational relationship with the animals that share the space of his home. All three of the poems employ some form of free verse, enhancing their colloquial and conversational effect. The inclusion of “Talking to Myself” in this triad sets up an equivalency between the human and non-human while playfully accentuating the very artifice of the construct, suggesting that perhaps any effort to “talk to” another species is always filtered through the self who imagines their end of the dialogue.

Theatricality, a mode Auden knows well as a playwright, peeks out from each of these poems. In “Talking to Dogs” Auden references Goethe and Lear, ending with “Let difference / remain our bond, yes, and the one trait / both have in common, a sense of theatre” (868 l.50-53). The sense of dialogue is created by the inserted “yes, as if the dog was adding his assent to the speaker’s claims. This is carried forth in “Talking to Mice” which begins with the lines commonly uttered by people when they encounter a mouse:

*Creepy! Get HER! Good Lord, what an oddity! One to steer clear of!
Fun! Impossible! Nice but a bore! An adorable monster!”*
But those animates which we call in our arrogance *dumb* are
judged as a species and classed by the melodramatic division,
either *Goodies* or *Baddies*. (868 l.1-2)

This opening cacophony of jumbled responses, akin to “Hunting Season,” begins to smudge the boundaries between human and non-human subjects. Phrases like “Nice but a bore!” are apt descriptions of human beings; consequently the surrounding lines take on

multiple registers and the “adorable monster” could be either a furry little creature with pink ears or a beautiful but cloyingly “dumb” human peer. The divisions erected between humans and other species are only a matter of degree, like “melodramatic division[s]” (868 l.4). Melodrama may even humorously indicate that the common attitude to the fact of genetic kinship is a fearful over-reaction or melodramatic response, as the use of italics throughout the poem suggests a thickly spread emphatic tone.

Similarly, “Talking to Myself” (870), in which the speaker’s consciousness addresses the speaker’s physicality, likens the mind/body relationship to a dramatic production where both the spoken lines and performed gestures create meaning:

Our marriage is a drama, but no stage-play where
 what is not spoken is not thought: in our theatre
 all that I cannot syllable You will pronounce
 in acts whose *raison-d’etre* escapes me. (871 l.46-49)

The “animal” aspect of the human being isn’t disavowed, but rather given a primary role in conveying meaning.⁷ Formally, this relationship is enacted by the conjoining “but” as well as the colon, which visually create division in the middle of the first two lines of the stanza, yet rhetorically join the adjacent phrases. The inclusion of the French phrase highlights the idea that the transfer between conscious thought and unconscious movement is a relationship of translation rather than incommunicability.

All three of these poems describe personal interactions with the animal being addressed. These direct and individual relationships evoke questions of ethical responsibility in the deaths that also transect each poem. “Talking to Dogs” is dedicated to a specific canine: “In memoriam Rolfi Stroble. Run over, June 9th, 1970” (867). Although the “you” of the poem is plural, the dedication lends a eulogistic particularity to

the poem. When the speaker recounts, “Being quicker to sense unhappiness / without having to be told the dreary / details or who is to blame, in dark hours / your silence may be of more help than many / two-legged comforters” the absence of the named dog and the sentiment of grief is poignantly recalled. Although the human culprit is anonymous, the fact that Rolfi’s death was caused by an automobile confirms human culpability. Indeed, the subject of the dog in the poem is frequently overshadowed or “run over” by metaphors that have more to say about humans than canines. The poem begins with an awareness of a dog’s perception of the world:

From us, of course, you want gristly bones
and to be led through exciting odorscapes
—their colors don’t matter—with the chance
of a rabbit to chase or of meeting
a fellow arse-hole to snuzzle at,
but your deepest fury is to be accepted
as junior members of a Salon
suaver in taste and manners than a pack (867 l.1-8)

The opening lines are still tinted with skeletal reminders of death “gristly bones” but convey a sense of a canine’s experience of “odorscapes” where “colors don’t matter.” Yet the lines quickly shift to metaphors that are more reminiscent of class differences between humans: “but your deepest fury is to be accepted / as junior members of a Salon” (867 l.6-7). These quickly moving references, from images that display a biological knowledge of how actual dogs behave to images that focus on grossly obvious human fetishes, continue throughout the poem. Taken as a whole, they create a heightened contrast between representations of the dog that are truly canine and representations of a dog that are only a thin veil for a human subject. The repeated back-and-forth juxtaposition highlights the accuracy of some descriptions and the falsity of

others, like the Salon. While the speaker may be unaware of the hairpin turns in these literary representations, they become markedly apparent to the attentive reader.

In “Talking to Mice” the speaker confesses himself to be the agent of the mice’s death. Initially, the two mice are described as “the most comely of all the miniature mammals,” and are compared to the dressed-up and personified illustrations of Beatrix Potter. The pair of mice live in placid cohabitation with the speaker and his other, unnamed, human companion. The pleasantry ends when the pair of mice exceeds the human population by having a litter. The decision to kill them is figured as political genocide perpetrated on innocents:

What occurred now confirmed that ancient political axiom:
When Words fail to persuade, then Physical force gives the orders
 Knowing you trusted in us, and would never believe an unusual
 object pertaining to men would be there for a sinister purpose,
 traps were baited (869 l.31-35)

Of course, the fact that the humans couldn’t have used “words” to persuade the mice superficially justifies the subsequent resort to violence. But the admitted trust of the mice and the description of the dead body—“one more broken cadaver, its black eyes beadily staring”—imputes blame. As the political analogy continues, it becomes clear that accepted nationalistic rationale doesn’t absolve the human actors, but rather reveals the immorality of socially accepted “civil” forms of behavior: “As / householders we had behaved exactly as every State does, / when there is something It wants, and a minor one gets in the way” (870 l.42-44). A poem that begins as a farcical look at social interaction between different people and between humans and rodents becomes a darker exploration of the socially acceptable sacrifice of any being that disconcerts those in power.

The anxiety concerning human connections to “lesser” animals is reprised in “Talking to Myself” when the speaker, beginning the poem to the “self” with a stanza describing “all feeders, vegetate or bestial” and “the deathless minerals,” recounts his beginning:

Unpredictably, decades ago, You arrived
among that unending cascade of creatures spewed
from Nature’s maw. A random event, says Science.
Random my bottom! A true miracle, say I,
for who is not certain that he was meant to be? (870-71 l.21-25)

Although the timeframe of “decades ago” signals the speaker’s own birth, the progress of the poem and the references to “Nature” and “Science” suggest a larger Darwinist context as well; the speaker is determined to exert his own uniqueness and the “miracle” of the emergence of the human form generally. The two agents that “say” in this stanza are the speaker and science; the speaker protests science to assert his preeminence. Yet even when attempting to defy natural science’s conclusions that humans are merely effluvia spit or “spew,” the human speaker’s idiom for disagreement, “my bottom!,” refers to animal functions and affirms a kind of random assignment of words and significance, just as the human form may not be “bottom” or top of any pre-ordained chain of being. At the end of the poem, the speaker envisions his own physical decay and pleads for the body to ignore the requests of the mind:

When *Le Bon Dieu* says to You *Leave him!*,
please, please, for His sake and mine, pay no attention
to my piteous *Don’ts*, but bugger off quickly (872 l.73-75)

The body has more authority to decide than either of the “speakers” of this stanza, god and intellect. This suggests that the life of the mind is limited to what body and nature

will allow—the capacity for speech doesn't always mean one will get the last word. As “bugger” implies, not only are humans insignificant and ephemeral, the human body may dictate sexuality in ways that reason or “talking cures” can't change or control.

In “A New Year Greeting” (1969) Auden considers the perspective of parasitic symbiots on a human host. The poem's epigraph gives credit to Mary J. Marples' article in the January 1969 edition of *Scientific American*⁸ for inspiring Auden's address to bodily beasties. The speaker is cast as a hospitable ecological niche:

my greetings to all of you, Yeasts,
 Bacteria, Viruses,
 Aerobics and Anaerobics:
 A Very Happy New Year
 To all for whom my ecotoderm
 is as Middle-Earth to me.
 For creatures your size I offer
 a free choice of habitat,
 so settle yourselves in the zone
 that suits you best, in the pools
 of my pores or the tropical
 forests of arm-pit and crotch,
 in the deserts of my fore-arms,
 or the cool woods of my scalp (838 l.13-16)

In poems like “A New Year Greeting” and “Address to the Beasts” (1973), the speaker's attitude is one of respect and admiration for the non-human other even when one might expect a reaction of abhorrence. The speaker is willing to imagine his most private parts as “forests” for yeasts who have their own lives to enjoy. As with the description of a dog's comforting presence in times of grief, in “Address to the Beasts” Auden gives non-human animals credit for gifts that exceed human habits, including hunting: “Of course you have to take lives / to keep your own, but never / kill for applause” (890 l.30-33) and identifies their songs as the precursor to human lyrics:

Exempt from taxation,
 you have never felt the need
 to become literate,

but your oral cultures
 have inspired our poets to pen
 dulcet verses

(890 1.37-42)

Non-human animals are credited with “cultures” and languages that may not be written, but have an oral art that humans attempt to emulate through poetry. Yet the lack of guile in non-human animals coincides with a lack of complex thought:

But you exhibit no signs
 of knowing that you are sentenced.
 Now could that be why

we upstarts are often
 jealous of your innocence,
 but never envious?

(891 1.64-69)

“Sentenced” here refers to both an awareness of mortality and the skill of language and composition. The stanza suggests that humans wouldn’t give up their claims to higher learning for a blissful animal ignorance of sin, guilt, shame, or death.

The presumption of a lack of higher functioning intellect in other animals, including the capacity for emotion and language, was commonplace during the later half of the twentieth century. Even Merleau-Ponty, who emphasized the shared aspects of human and non-human experience muses: “Is there an animal consciousness, and if so, to what extent?” (*Nature* 199). Therefore, it is not surprising that Auden’s celebration of the positive qualities of non-humans retains a skepticism about non-human self-awareness. What *is* remarkable is the frequency with which Auden often worked against this premise, representing nature and the non-human as *capable* of speaking through

meaningful, communicative codes. Even in an essay about the craft of writing, Auden can't resist an aside about non-human animals:

Many animals have a code of communication, auditory or visual or olfactory signals by which individual members of the species convey to each other information about food, sex, territory, the presence of enemies, etc, which is essential to their survival and in social animals like the bee, this code may become extremely complex, but no animal, so far as we know addresses another personally, though some domesticated animals like dogs can respond to their names when addressed by humans. All animal signals, one might say, are statements in the third person. [. . .] If we only used words as a communication code, then it seems probable that, as with animals, the human species would only have one language with, at most, dialect variations like the song of the chaffinch. [. . .] But as persons we are capable of speech proper. In speech one unique person addresses another unique person and does so voluntarily: he could keep silent if he chose. We speak as persons because we desire to disclose ourselves to each other and to share our experiences, not because we need to share them, but because we enjoy sharing them. ("Words and the Word" 120-22)

Although Auden persists in distinguishing non-human parlance as inferior to the intricacies of human speech, it is revealing that animals play a prominent role in an essay about the ostensibly unrelated topic of human language. He is even compelled to acknowledge that animals have a gestural and sensory language that has a counterpart, albeit a simplistic one, in human speech. As this essay demonstrates, the question of the animal was often at the forefront of Auden's thoughts about creativity and the literary arts. Like the lingering doubt that creeps into this essay, his poetry also betrays an allegiance to the possibility that the communication of other species may be closer to human language than commonly thought.

Poems such as "Their Lonely Betters" (1950), "Symmetries and Asymmetries" (1961), and "Natural Linguistics" (1969) analogize human and non-human modes of communication. Critics who have looked at "Their Lonely Betters" presume the speaker

transparently announces the poem's theme.⁹ A closer reading reveals that the poem derides claims to superiority as spurious:

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
 To all the noises that my garden made,
 It seemed to me only proper that words
 Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through
 The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
 And rustling flowers for some third party waited
 To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

Not one of them was capable of lying,
 There was not one which knew that it was dying
 Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
 Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters
 Who count some days and long for certain letters;
 We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
 Words are for those with promises to keep. (583)

The privileged, leisure-class position of the speaker is foregrounded and a power dynamic is implied with the verb “withheld.” The following stanzas reinforce an association between smug class-prejudice and the speaker's assumptions about the animals in “his” garden property. The robin's song becomes a nationalistic anthem and the flowers resemble gowned girls eager for marriage, invoking stereotypes about “commoners” naïve about their government and preoccupied with romantic fanfare. As a result, the phrase “lonely betters” is less applicable to the human species as a whole than it is to an elite class of educated writers who are capable of thoughts and feelings the lower-class masses don't have access to: “Let them leave language to their lonely betters.” Phrases such as “We, too” underscores a tone of undeserved self-pity. The

“loneliness” is related to the position of the chosen few who “long for certain letters,” referring both to correspondence from an absent community and to the struggle of trying to compose great literature. “Those with promises to keep” are not just any people; they are poets like Robert Frost, whose poem “Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening,” is echoed here. Of course, this speaker, in ironic contrast to Frost’s speaker in “Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening” is dozing in his beach chair on a warm summer afternoon rather than ending a long day of work in the biting cold, contemplating the “sleep” of mortality and death. One might argue that the fluid intermingling of natural imagery and social bias diminishes the ecocritical importance of the poem. However, the poem draws attention to the flimsy logic and latent bias that fuels distinctions between both human and ecological “others.” “Their Lonely Betters” shows how often these prejudices about nature reside in cultural, human constructions of value that ought to be scrutinized, exposed, and changed. The inability to accurately perceive non-human capabilities and perspectives is highlighted when the reader is challenged to see him or herself in a light that encourages criticism of narcissistic self-interest.

“Symmetries and Asymmetries,” a long poem which recalls William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in its form and content, begins by unearthing hidden symmetries in organic form and the human desire to possess natural riches: “Deep in earth’s opaque mirror, / The old oak’s roots / Reflected in its branches: / Astrologers in reverse, / Keen-eyed miners / Conned their scintillant gems” (731 1.4-6). Unlike astrologers who look for shining objects in the night sky, the miners who look for sparkles in the dark loam seek personal gain. Their “sin” is buried in the sounds of

“scintillant.” From there, the poem transitions to mythic and pastoral imagery, suggesting that one of the things humans have taken from the earth is a natural imagery put in the service of tales that cover up darker human motives. Seventeen stanzas later, the poem asks “Could any tiger / Drink martinis, smoke cigars, / And last as we do?” (733 l.55-57). The question toys with the problem of personification and the paradigm between the ominous luster of Blake’s tiger eyes—“Tyger! Tyger! burning bright / In the forests of the night” (“The Tyger” in *Songs of Experience*) and monikers of a “brilliant” witty society that is actually going up in smoke. But, more importantly, these lines are part of several stanzas that mark a transition within the poem from the presumed “innocence” of pastoral imagery employed in earlier stanzas and the more mature or modern “experience” of nature, embodiment, and society:

To himself the Brute Fact:
To others (sometimes)
A useful metaphor

Because the level table
Made him think of steppes,
He knew it was there.

Like the redstart,
He recalls but a formless fragment
Of his real tune.

A sign-post points him out his road:
But names no place,
Numbers no distance.

Not daring to saunter,
He made forced marches,
Uphill, against the wind.

Hunting for some lost object
 He was meant to forget,
 He lost himself. (734 l.67-84)

The brute fact of our own self-knowledge is compared with the way we are perceived by others. As Blake uses the lamb and tiger for symbols of the light and dark sides of human nature, Auden recalls that we are all flattened into shadows of our embodied selves when we are employed as vehicles for some other person's chosen tenor. Just as a tiger can be employed for a poetic point, humans can be urged into "forced marches / Uphill, against wind"—an image that recalls the way men are used to serve nationalistic purposes. Unlike earlier poems that rely on place-names and maps as central imagery for nature and place, "Symmetries and Asymmetries" suggests that the embodied experience of being within a place should be predominant. The continual search for objects and mythological totems that give ultimate meaning or never-ending life are fruitless quests that only result in forgetting the more elemental experiences of a meaningful existence. No particular "there" is named. Instead, the relationship of metaphor insists on bringing together the individual and local with the global and geographic: "Because the level table / made him think of steppes / He knew it was there." The "level table" is both a homely kitchen table and the top of a plateau, just as "steppes" audibly conflates the steps of a staircase with vast stretches of grassy plain. The divergent scales are brought into balance. A tiger's territory and the boundaries of familiar human habitat become symmetrical. Further, these stanzas suggest that both tigers and humans are capable of being misled, used to fulfill another's purpose. Each must ask, as Blake's poem does, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" ("The Tyger" 54 l.20); Each must interrogate

whether there is a dark side of any force that claims the power to construct the meaning of another's life. The literary devices of personification and metaphor are implicated in constructing those relationships.

The enduring belief that only humans have language is persistently invoked to justify acts of human superiority over other animals.¹⁰ This attitude, which the speaker of the poem "Their Lonely Betters" assumes, is deconstructed in "Natural Linguistics" (1969). The poem begins by announcing, "Every created thing has ways of pronouncing its ownhood:" (848 l.1). Using techniques reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who offers nature's presumed flaws as signs of god's infinite variety in "Pied Beauty," Auden parallels grammar with other natural codes:

basic and used by all, even the mineral tribes,
is the hieroglyphical *koine* of visual appearance
which, though it lacks the verb, is, when compared with our own

heaviest lexicons, so much richer and subtler in shape-nouns,
color-adjectives and apt prepositions of place.
Verbs first appear with the flowers who utter imperative odors
which, with their taste for sweets, insects are bound to obey
motive, too, in the eyes of beasts is the language of gesture
(urban life has, alas, sadly impoverished ours),
signals of interrogation, friendship, threat and appeasement,
instantly taken in, seldom, if ever, misread.

(848 l.2-12)

Auden's colloquial free verse hides linguistic intricacy just as humans are used to overlooking the patterns in non-human signals. All organic forms are identified by visual markers, just as the Greek *koine* provided a common language uniting the Alexandrine empire. Merleau-Ponty explains the natural world as a primordial structure from which language arises: "The origin of language is mythic; that is, there is always a language

before language, which is perception. Architectonic of language. [. . .] Language as a resumption of the logos of the sensible world in an other architectonic” (*Nature* 219).

Auden acknowledges that the visual plane introduces us to signs and symbols that can be “read” to coalesce into a specific meaning or a particular element. Even crystalline patterns of growth present a language of signs that pronounce their identity. The theme of the poem overlaps with Hopkins’ notion of “inscape,” or the bringing forth of the individual essence of each thing. The Hopkins-esque conjoined adjectives “shape-nouns” and “color-adjectives” rub together to reveal a unique sheen of meaning. These combinations not only recall combinations like “couple-colour” and “chestnut-falls” (“Pied Beauty”), but also set up an equation, the hyphen serving as an “=” sign between forms accessed through embodied perception, “shape” and “color,” and their grammatical counterparts, “nouns” and “adjectives.” Conversely, natural forms also resemble written punctuation: The flowers “utter imperative odors” and the symbol for the grammatical imperative “!” has the form of a petal attached to a flower’s round center, the source of orders and odors. For animals, the “eyes” reveal their “I.” The range and subtlety of what their gestural communication conveys surpasses human ability and, since it is rarely “misread,” seems to get closer to accuracy and truth than human language will allow.

The poem proceeds to recognize even the spray of urine as “messages” (848 l.15) of “an indicative AM” (848 l.14). Auden concludes: “‘Dumb’ we may call them but, surely, our poets are right in assuming / all would prefer that they were rhetorized *at* than *about*” (849 l.37-38). As in “Hunting Season,” Auden makes use of an unclear antecedent to provide an example of the potential misreadings of human language. “All would prefer

that they were rhetorized *at* than *about*” does not specify whether “they” refers just to the non-humans—“them in the previous line”—or whether “they” refers back to an “all” which encompasses both humans and non-humans. In one sense, humans might agree that everyone would prefer to be spoken to directly or talked “at” (as Auden does in “Talking to Dogs,” and “Talking to Mice”) rather than spoken “about” as gossip to others. But the word “rhetorized” also invites one to consider the grammatical functions of words like “at” and “about”—prepositions that specify relationships between two nouns, as the poem seeks to define a closer relation between human and non-human communication. It seems noteworthy that the words “at” and “about,” both begin and end with the same letters, just as the nature of human and non-human language may have more in common than initially presumed.

Communicating with Place

Auden’s description of his own approach to analyzing poetry combines questions of language with ethics of place: “Speaking for myself, the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: ‘Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?’ The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: ‘What kind of guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?’” (“Making, Knowing and Judging” 51). Even the human aspects of Auden’s questions—“What kind of guy *inhabits* this poem?”—are contextualized with ideas of what it means to live in a particular habitat and be in relationships reminiscent of hunter

and hunted with others who share that literary space—“What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?” Although Auden’s pairing of mechanical concerns for the technicality of syntax with investigations of ethics and notions of “the good place” may seem initially quixotic, his early fascination with the landscapes of abandoned mines creates a more pragmatic connection between the two sets of inquiries about a poem.

In an essay ostensibly reviewing the autobiographies of Leonard Woolf and Evelyn Waugh, Auden stirs in generous helpings of his own remembrances as well: “Between the ages of six and twelve, I spent a great many of my waking hours in the construction and elaboration of a private sacred world, the basic elements of which were a landscape, northern and limestone, and industry, lead mining” (“As It Seemed To Us” 502). In 1965, Auden wrote a love poem for this landscape, titled “Amor Loci.” Where some see “Any musical future most unlikely” (779 l.26-27) in a place of “dejected masonry, moss, decomposed machines” (779 l.18-20), the speaker knows the terrain as a lover knows his beloved’s body: “I could draw its map by heart, / showing its contours, / strata and vegetation, / name every height, / small burn and lonely sheiling” (779 l.1-5). His abiding affection for this place and the ability of the place to still reach out and touch the recesses of his own emotions teaches him that there are loves that endure despite the deterioration of age and stretches of forlorn abandonment:

How but with some real focus
of desolation
could I, by analogy,
imagine a Love
that, however often smeared,
shrugged at, abandoned

by a frivolous worldling,
does not abandon? (780 l.42-49)

For Auden, combinations of mechanization and rural place aren't incongruous or antagonistic. Questions of human invention are "naturally" embedded in images of natural landscape. Thus, tinkering with "verbal contraptions" is already implicated in representations of the environment. Artifice isn't divorced from natural representations; it is always a component of the discovery of place and human history within it.

Auden's "Bucolics" series, consisting of poems titled "Winds," "Woods," "Mountains," "Lakes," "Islands," "Plains," and "Streams" uncoils the artistic constructions of pastoral poetry, showing how culture and nature have long been bound together in literary tradition. However, Auden ends the series with a final twist in "Streams" that returns to phenomenal interactions with nature. Although some critics have resisted identifying a cohesive project in this series, or hear only a grave anti-pastoral note¹¹ without the blend of other registers, Mendelson opens up more productive invitations for interpretation, noting its "profundity of laughter" (378) and unifying theme. He argues that all the poems are "the products of an outsider's deliberate half-successful attempts to regain intimacy with nature" (381). Indeed, the poems incorporate many traditional pastoral elements including the urban figure on retreat, a mixture of high and low classes, romance, the use of nature to mask political inequity, and the symbolic aesthetic of rural imagery. However, Auden adds a uniquely modern sensibility to all of these standard pastoral tropes.

As such, Auden's "Bucolics" resemble Gifford's definition of post-pastoral texts, which share six main attributes: "an awe in attention to the natural world" (152); a

“creative-destructive universe” (153); “the recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature” (156); “an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature” (162); an ethical suggestion that “with consciousness comes conscience” (163); and a recognition that the “exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities (165). Gifford’s complex post-pastoral formula may not neatly apply to Auden’s “Bucolics” in all respects, but many categories within the pastoral genre are best understood as supple frameworks. Gifford notes: “Some writers [. . .] are capable of writing, at different times, pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral texts [. . .] One might read different passages as pastoral, anti-pastoral or post-pastoral” (150). “Bucolics” is post-pastoral in that it blends images of nature and culture to promote an awareness of how humans construct nature, a theme implied in four of Gifford’s post-pastoral elements. In “Bucolics” getting “back to nature,” or the movement of pastoral retreat, is also a trip through time, alluding to the wider scope of evolution; the presence of high and low classes is evident in the juxtaposition of erudite vocabulary and colloquial idioms rather than specific characters; hidden biases concerning sexual preferences are more prominent than class prejudices; politics is refigured as the conspiratorial conquest of international boundaries that threatens all living things; and the human-created visual arts of word, painting, and sculpture are ultimately trumped by the nature’s own song in the classic pastoral contest between musicians.

The title of the inaugural ode, “Winds,” coincides with the verb “winds,” blending the natural movement of air with a mechanized kinetic energy setting the sequence in motion. This lexicon is reinforced by the opening lines:

Deep, deep below our violences,
Quite still, lie our First Dad, his watch
and many little maids (556 l.1-3)

The layers of deep time operate as strata of earth that don’t quite cover up innate savagery, the “violences” or “lie[s]” that are “still,” meaning either put to rest, or a continuing presence. The first human, the “Dad” whose “watch” measures the time homo sapiens first appeared, recalls biological origins that reach farther back than the poem’s literary fathers, Virgil and Ovid. “Winds” also signifies a holy god’s breath of life, “His holy insufflation” (556 l.8), and the poet’s inspirational muse, “Goddess of winds and wisdom” (557 l.34), speaking to her poet. Yet, as Mendelson so cleverly identifies, “winds” has a third, more irreverent reference:

When, on some windless day [. . .]
Your poet with bodily tics,
Scratching, tapping his teeth,
Tugging the lobe of an ear,
Unconsciously invokes You,
Show your good nature (557 l.34-41)

In these lines, Auden coyly gives the body a place alongside the holy winds as he subtly describes a very literary fart: “The only serious modern English verse about farting” (Mendelson 382).¹² The casual intermingling of high and low is continued in references to the masses’ attitude towards weather, interrupted by a parenthetical description of crowds searching for a measure of meaning:

When I seek an image
 For our Authentic City,
 (Across what brigs of dread,
 Down what gloomy galleries, Must we stagger or crawl
 Before we may cry—O look!?)
 I see old men in hall-ways
 Tapping their barometers;
 Or a lawn over which
 The first thing after breakfast,
 A paterfamilias
 Hurries to inspect his rain-guage. (557 l.21-32)

Like the dual meaning of “watch”—the noun chronometer and the verb to see—this passage recalls the groping pursuit of evolutionary and cultural enlightenment brought about by sailing voyages of discovery (“brigs,” galleys/”galleries”), at the same time it comically describes the popular search for some artistic masterpiece in museum “galleries”—a visual marker of worth that is then folded into the images of “old men in hall-ways” who go about “Tapping their barometers.” Emotive and bodily force are siphoned from wind and weather; they are reduced to a visual measurement in a device one can look at to measure distance, volume, and achievement. The Linnaean freight of “paterfamilias” recalls the “First Dad,” comically obsessed with meteorological, as well as chronological measurement. The farting poet who appears towards the end of the poem is also an Adam-figure who transforms the aural beauty of wind into something that is visible, or “named” by the poet-creator:

[. . .] he may hear,
 Equinox gales at midnight
 Howling through the marram grass,
 Or a faint susurraton
 Of pines on a cloudless
 Afternoon in midsummer,
 Let him feel You present,
 That every verbal rite

May be fittingly done,
 And done in anamnesis
 Of what is excellent
 Yet a visible creature,
 Earth, Sky, a few dear names. (558 l.52-64)

The abrupt caesuras in the final line deflate the rhythm of the wind into a spondee of hard, one-syllable words that have none of the lyric movement of the more palpable “marram grass” and “susurrations” of pines. Thus, the final lines of naming “what is excellent” are reductive, not superior emanations of a poet’s “higher” art. The way humans use and measure wind sucks the poetic beauty from the wind’s elemental force. Auden’s “Winds” is about human culture, but it also keenly suggests, with some amusing chagrin, how the anthropocentric deployments are far less ethereal than the natural essence the poem supposedly honors.

Elements of this formula are reprised in all of the poems leading up to “Streams.” “Woods” comments on the canvases of Piero di Cosimo, who painted a “sylvan” (558 l.1) scene that “meant savage” (558 l.1), depicting naked humans and fantastical centaurs who didn’t frolic with flutes, but rather engaged in hunter-prey relations: “Where nudes, bears, loins, sows with women’s heads / Mounted and murdered and ate each other raw” (558 l.3-4). These early humans didn’t know Vulcan yet (a god featured in another painting of Piero di Cosimo), so “fled the useful flame” (558 l.6). Here, the poem begins to unite images of consumption, consummation, and sexual appetite. The woods hide the “Guilty intention still look[ing] for a hotel / That wants no details and surrenders none; / A wood is that, and throws in charm as well” (559 (l. 13-15). Like Forster’s characters Maurice and Alec who seek refuge in the greenwood, the speaker imagines a forest-

retreat for lovers who would be scorned by a society that teaches “their silly flocks” (558 l.10) to “abhor the licence of the grove” (558 l.12). There is a suggestion of indecorous bodily function in this poem too: “And late man, listening through his latter grief, / Hears, close or far, the oldest of his joys, / Exactly as it was, the water noise. / A well-kempt forest begs Our Lady’s grace; / Someone is not disgusted” (559 l.40-44). While this water echoes the aquatic images that flow through all the poems until they culminate in “Streams,” the need to beg nature’s pardon may also insinuate that someone has just peed in the forest. But the poem goes on to remind the reader that the occasional bladder incident is not the real source of the wood’s defilement. Instead, what “The trees encountered on a country stroll / Reveal” about “a country’s soul” is the “small grove massacred to the last ash” and “an oak with heart-rot” that “give away the show” portending “This great society is going smash” (559-60 l.47-51). Again, the processes of deforestation and artful pruning (the English were even known to cut arches into larger Oaks), puts nature in the service of society and robs the trees of their own strength and vitality as natural beings, processes which ultimately show up the stunted ethical standards of a not-so “advanced” human culture.

These same oblivious citizens also ineptly attempt to claim the mountains as a measure of their own solipsistic achievement in “Mountains”:

Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery
 For points up, are a bit alarming;
 They have the balance, nerve,
 And habit of the Spiritual, but what God
 Does their Order serve? (560 l.18-22)

The speaker suggests that they seek their own glory rather than any holy or spiritual quest. The body also lurks within the poem, as “Mountains” may refer to buttocks. The fifth stanza states that the “boy behind his goats” (561 l.45) may be the lover of “that quiet old gentleman / With a cheap room at the Black Eagle” who is “not received in Society now” (561 l.48-50), leading the speaker to confess, “I’d much rather stay / Where the nearest person who could have me hung is / Some ridges away” (561 l.53-55). This veiled reference to homosexuality shades the glorified male dalliances in classic pastoral odes with the more ominous consequences of contemporary homosexuality.

The somewhat petulant speaker of the poems in this middle section, whose “I” appears first in “Mountains,” often denounces the pleasant tones of the superficial naturalist by declaring boredom or even revulsion for the landscapes of each poem. Indeed, the places become more steeped in allegory and more distant from their natural origins as the series progresses. “Lakes” expresses the small-mindedness of heteronormative culture (reminiscent of the Peaslake family in Forster’s “Albergo Empedocle”), “Islands” dwells on the problem of narcissism, and “Plains” seems to pique the speaker’s fear of ever being “plain” or ordinary. Auden’s series intensifies the reader’s understanding that the pastoral “Bucolics” have been overtaken and subsumed by human interests. Tellingly, the poem that immediately proceeds the “Bucolics” in the *Collected Poems*, is “Ode to Gaea,” which ends:

[. . .] what,

to Her, the real one, can our good landscapes be but lies,
 those woods where tigers chum with deer and no root dies,
 that tideless bay where children
 play Bishop on a golden shore?

The conclusion of “Ode to Gaea” prepares the reader to approach “Bucolics” as poems that take one away from “real” nature. Yet, like a surprising final couplet, “Streams” reclaims nature’s phenomenal force as a separate entity that surpasses human efforts at art and communication.

“Streams” announces nature’s triumphant reclamation of creative power and unifying love. It suggests nature still retains an unvanquished presence in the too-human world. However, for the attuned reader of Auden’s poetry, the boisterous, celebratory tone of this poem invites skepticism. Mendelson notes the poem’s persistent arcadian artifice—“the prize of a recovered intimacy with nature has been won, but the poem is realistic enough to envision it only in the admitted artifice of a rococo dream” (385)—and Michael North’s psychological critique acknowledges that the harmonious contentment of “Streams” “can only be fitfully visited” (106). Admittedly, “Streams” does revive some of the pastoral working-class stereotypes and natural personifications that Auden’s earlier poems have trained the reader to question, including personifications of water that cast it as a working peasant: “The most well-spoken of all the / older servants in the household of Mrs Nature” (567 l.7-8). Yet, unlike the way class-divisions and nature’s subservience to humans are never directly acknowledged in classic pastoral works, images of forced labor are directly evident in “Streams”:

And not even man can spoil you: his company
coarsens roses and dogs but, should he herd you through a sluice
to toil at a turbine, or keep you
leaping in gardens for his amusement,

innocent still is your outcry, water, and there
even, to his soiled heart raging at what it is,

tells of a sort of world, quite other,
altogether different from this one (568 l.33-40)

Even when humans attempt to divert the stream for their own purposes, the water retains its own story and distinctive voice, offering a cleansing reminder that humans are also part of the “soil”—connoting the earth, the natural being humanity “is,” and all of the sins in the previous stanza that recount the stain of humanity’s egoism against the land that sustains it. This kind of blatant acknowledgement indicates a difference between blithe pastoral fantasy and the attempt to create a hope for a more sustainable joy.

Similarly, the poem’s references to “a croquet tournament / in a calm enclosure” (569 l.49-50) and the entrance of “a cream and golden coach / drawn by two baby locomotives” within which “the god of mortal doting approached us” (569 l.58-60), repeat classic pastoral archetypes that dubiously reconstruct nature as a mask of frivolity, but the context of the poem gives them a new sheen. The beloved and the figure of the god both take on resonances that connect them with water. The image of the darling is conflated with the water’s voice in the poem’s last stanza: “dearer, water, than ever your voice, as if / glad—though goodness knows why—to run with the human race” (569 l. 69-70). As a result the lover with whom the speaker playfully has his running frolic—“suddenly, over the lawn we started to run” (569 l.57)—may also be the water itself. Even the god drawn by some admittedly ornate cupid-tugboats, “baby locomotives,” is a Poseidon-like deity “flanked by [. . .] hairy armigers in green / who laugh at thunderstorms and weep at a blue sky” (569 l.61-62), resembling weeping willows or other trees that twirl their leaves at the onset of watery weather and droop at a lack thereof. When the god “promised X and Y a passion undying” (569 l.64) the

streams become sperm and amniotic fluids of birth that bind X and Y chromosomes to renew human life, a reminder that both the earth and the human body are made up of a high percentage of water. Instead of a pastoral poem where all the images of nature relate back to humans, in this final poem, all the images of humans point back to water. The literary pastoral tropes are employed, but they are now put in the service of nature. Human figures and references to Renaissance art become symbols for nature, with “streams” as the constant referent.

Yet the most startling formal distinction setting this poem apart from the previous odes in “Bucolics,” is an emphasis on aurality rather than imagery. While other poems rely on a play of images and motifs to sustain multiple layers of meaning, “Streams” markedly makes sound recreate the presence of water. The rippling rhythm, onomatopoeia, and alliteration of “s” and “t” sounds that make the words replicate the splashes and gurgles of water as it moves, recreate an embodied experience of streams. It is the language of the water and the capacity for fluidity to unite flesh and feeling that announces a new mode in this last “Bucolics” verse. The first and last stanzas exemplify the phonic power of the lines:

Dear water, clear water, playful in all your streams,
as you dash or loiter through life who does not love
to sit beside you, to hear you and see you,
pure being, perfect in music and movement? (567 l.1-4)

and dearer, water than ever your voice, as if
glad—though goodness knows why—to run with the human race,
wishing, I thought, the least of men their
figures of splendor, their holy places. (569 l.69-72)

The caesuras of commas and dashes interrupting the movement at irregular syllabic intervals mimic the trip and tumble of water being diverted in its path by the occasional jutting rock. The two sets of three-stressed feet with repeated hard consonant sounds—“Dear water, clear water”—requires an enunciation that makes the tongue repeatedly roll up and down quickly from the roof of the mouth to the bottom palate—replicating the force of splash and spray that sets water in motion. This sharp opening is followed by a long enjambed line that lolls over “l”s and peaks at “t”s and “s”s: “as you dash and loiter through life who does not love to sit beside you.” The combination of a long uninterrupted stream of speech and the contrast between several soft and hard consonants echoes the “dash and loiter” the line describes. The three-syllable feet of “to hear you and see you, / pure being” draw attention to the senses. These phrases also place an emphasis on “you,” the essence of the stream, instead of the “I” of the speaker, which dominated earlier odes. The “m”s of “music and movement” aurally create the rounded completeness of water’s qualities. The “I” that appears in the last stanza is a humble speaker, acknowledging that the desire for water to baptize man anew is a very human wish; it is not necessarily imputed to nature’s own intention.

The water in “Streams” dissolves difference and remains the common essence of all living things. Water appears as an image in all the other poems, but its importance to binding landscapes and people together, allowing a medium for ingress and egress from region to region, being to being, is explicitly recognized in “Streams”: “at home in all sections, but for whom we should be / idolators of a single rock, kept apart / by our landscapes, excluding as alien / the tales and diets of all other strata” (568 l.17-20).

Water flows laterally and seeps down vertically, joining geographical masses and subterranean strata. The flow of water is not only a means of travel, it is also a bard that sings “tales” of foreign places and beings. The promise of communication through song suggests that what is considered “foreign” may be included within cultural understanding rather than “excluded” as “alien.” Finally, the water is “at home” with all, suggesting the companionship and intimacy between human and non-human.

Just as “Streams” suggests the possibility of a personal, embodied relationship with nature at the end of “Bucolics,” domestic bonds with nature and fleshly depictions of place predominate Auden’s series of poems about interior spaces, “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” (1962-64). In other words, the fluidity of boundaries between culture and nature is prevalent in Auden’s meditations not only about humans within nature, but also nature within human architecture. The poems in “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” explore the various spaces of the home. Just as “Woods,” “Mountains,” and “Plains,” are generalized names for types of natural topographies, “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” dedicates different poems to areas like the study, “The Cave of Making;” the cellar, “Down There;” the attic, “Up There;” the lavatory, “The Geography of the House;” the bath “Encomium Balnei;” the kitchen “Grub First, Then Ethics;” the guest bedroom “For Friends Only;” the dining room “To-Night At Seven Thirty;” the bedroom “The Cave of Nakedness;” and the living room “The Common Life.” As with “Bucolics,” Auden begins the series with a historical consideration of origins, specifically the ancestry of dwellings, “Prologue: The Birth of Architecture.” The post-script to this poem analogizes the architecture of one’s home to

one's body bounded by a semi-permeable flesh, another kind of territory that has its rules of etiquette:

Some thirty inches from my nose
 The frontier of my person goes,
 And all the untilled air between
 Is private *pagus* or demesne.
 Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes
 I beckon you to fraternize,
 Beware of rudely crossing it:
 I have no gun, but I can spit. (688 l.1-8)

This playful epilogue makes the human body its own environment whose boundaries do not stop at the epidermal layer, but are measured by a sensory bubble of self-hood that is felt to extend through the porous boundary of skin to the outskirts of “untilled air” between oneself and another. Communication is gestural: invitations are made through the bodies’ equivalent of a “bedroom” look, and the speaker will register an affront by hurling bodily fluid. Architecture, landscape, and language share an easy coalescence in Auden’s poetry. Just as water is commended for its ability to cross boundaries in “Streams,” Auden’s pleasures are often located in the portals of the body. “The Geography of the House” appreciates that even when sexual pleasure dwindles, “a satisfactory / Dump is a good omen / All our adult days” (698 l.22-24). Likewise a place feels like “home” when it is “a place / I may go both in and out of” (“Thanksgiving for a Habitat” 691 l.79-80). Good living, a feeling of being at “home” both in a place and with oneself, is expressed as bodily freedom of movement.

Nature isn’t shooed out of the space of the house; it is also allowed to move freely within as well as without, a hallmark of the speaker’s personal relationship with it. All but one (“Grub First, Then Ethics” 1958) of the twelve poems in the series were written

between 1962 and 1964, after Auden purchased the only home he ever owned, in Kirchstetten, Austria in 1957 (Davenport-Hines 297). Reminiscent of Forster's hesitancy about feelings of feudal power after purchasing Piney Copse, Auden's acquisition seems to have prompted an initial proprietary pride. The speaker of the poem that shares the title of the entire sequence, "Thanksgiving For A Habitat," proclaims he is "dominant over three acres and a blooming conurbation of country lives" (689 l.37-39). The next nine stanzas, close to half the poem, are dedicated to non-human occupants of the speaker's home. Even though spiders "give me the shudders" (689 l.43) the speaker refuses to exterminate them, suggesting a parallel to the Nazis: "fools / who deface the emblem of guilt / are germane to Hitler: the race of spiders / shall be allowed their webs" (689-90 l.43-46). Auden uses the resemblance between a swastika and the black legs protruding from a spider's body as a warning against mistreating any human or ecological other as a result of prejudice; both spiders and humans have a right to build homes in the same place. Whether the subject is differences between people or differences between species, what they have in common is more significant than any features that separate one from another. Similarly, Auden notes the distance between human languages and bird songs while overlapping them in a common space and assuming shared responses to emotional stimuli:

[. . .] I should like
to be to my water-brethren as a spell
of fine weather: Many are stupid,

and some, maybe, are heartless, but who is not
vulnerable, easy to scare,
and jealous of his privacy? (I am glad
the blackbird, for instance, cannot

tell if I'm talking English, German or
 just typewriting: that what he utters
 I may enjoy as an alien rigmarole.) (690 l.46-55)

The speaker's contentment with indecipherability is based on what he assumes to be a mutual desire for privacy—an empathy that denotes sympathetic connection to the ways non-human animals may share the same feelings that humans do—vulnerability, jealousy, protective privacy—even as he relishes the difference between them. All of the lines in this poem begin at alternating margins, suggesting a measured gap between human and non-human that isn't too far, but still allows for an easy compromise and cooperation, a habitat “where I needn't, ever, be at home *to* those I am not at home *with*” (690-91 l.76-77) and a “place I may go both in and out of” (691 l.79-80) as humans and non-humans share permeable boundaries in shared place, and images of nature commingle with emblems of culture in a relationship not always blissful, but consistently comfortable.

Words in the Flesh of the World

The extent to which the environment is a constant companion in Auden's poetry, a voice to be listened to, and a presence that provokes and nourishes the human speakers, is epitomized in “First Things First” (1956). The poem begins with a solitary sleeper awakened by the sound of night rain:

Woken, I lay in the arms of my own warmth and listened
 To a storm enjoying its storminess in the winter dark
 Till my ear, as it can when half-asleep or half-sober,
 Set to work to unscramble that interjectory uproar,

Construing its airy vowels and watery consonants
 Into a love-speech indicative of a Proper Name. (583 l.1-6)

Both the speaker and the storm are content with themselves, the human “in the arms of my own warmth” and the “storm enjoying its storminess.” The stanza is flush with physical sensation—the recognition of the self-generating heat of one’s own flesh, the almost involuntary process of making meaning from the “airy vowels” and “watery consonants” of the symphony of plinks and plonks wetly making contact with the exterior surfaces of the home, are all sensory elements. Even the drive to divine language from sound is an innate part of a human response to the promptings of the non-human environment. Merleau-Ponty explains that the connection between natural patterns of meaning and human efforts to communicate through particular combinations of sounds that make up words and sentences have a common origin: “The Nature in us must have some relation to the Nature outside of us; moreover, Nature outside of us must be unveiled to us by the Nature that we are” (*Nature* 206). The urge to order is also attributed to the finely coordinated relationships abundant in the natural world: “There is a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies” (*Nature* 212). Human language is only one form Logos takes. Akin to the presence of pigments in plants and animals that create a perfect camouflage for their environments, or the physical attributes of some species that are uniquely necessary for life in their particular geographic region, human manifestations, including language, are embedded within the larger structures of the natural world. This embodiment does not separate flesh from mind; rather neurological function emanates from an anatomically embodied brain and signals of sensory experience. Auden’s poem evinces this understanding when the voice

of the rain begins to sound to him like a “Proper Name” of a lover he once knew. This unnamed lover is described in terms of landscape, and the colors of a moist, verdant climate, inverting literary personification: “Likening your poise of being to an upland country, / Here green on purpose, / there pure blue for luck” (584 l.11-12). Yet the comparison to the storm itself seems to end here.

In the third stanza, the story the storm tells to the fitful sleeper is a memory of love in an entirely different weather:

Loud though it was, alone as it certainly found me,
 It reconstructed a day of peculiar silence
 When a sneeze could be heard a mile off, and had me walking
 On a headland of lava beside you, the occasion as ageless
 As the stare of any rose, your presence exactly
 So once, so valuable, so there, so now. (584 l.13-18)

The physicality of the day, the landscape, and the beloved is what is recalled, rather than any particular conversation between them. A decidedly unromantic bodily function, the sneeze, is heard, and the “silence” is filled with palpable meaning. Walking together, the “presence” of the person is recalled so vividly that it is “exactly / so.” Yet the inability for any living thing to be captured in still-frame, preserved against time, is also denied by the poem. The speaker may wish the “stare of any rose” to be “ageless,” but for a living plant, or the unblinking eye of a corpse, deterioration is inevitable. Just as the bedrock is forever altered by eruptions of viscous flows of molten lava, what seems solid is subject to metamorphosis. Water or rain also changes from one state to another, and this remembered human relationship, once apparently strong, has at some point dissolved.¹³ Even the repetition of “so” showcases the shifting meanings of this simple two-letter word: “exactly / so” as to fix a thing precisely, “so valuable” as in very or much, “so

there” meaning as it was, and “so now” meaning the same as. Indeed the ability of the memory to recall through time and through place suggests the vast mutability of existence itself.

The poem’s speaker pauses to reflect that this unexpected recollection of love offered by the storm directly contrasts with the fears that normally wake him in the night “when only too often / A smirking devil annoys me in beautiful English, / Predicting a world where every sacred location / Is a sand-buried site all cultured Texans do” (584 l.19-22). The speaker dreads an apocalyptic landscape where genuine discovery is replaced by consumer tourism—a vision of a more horrific kind of transformation that is specifically human-created, “in beautiful English.” In juxtaposition, the memory the storm creates for the speaker is affectionate and kind.

The problem of who is actually “speaking” this verse—the conflation of stormy voice and human translation—is recognized in the poem’s final stanza:

Grateful, I slept till a morning that would not say
 How much it believed of what I said the storm had said
 But quietly drew my attention to what had been done
 —So many cubic metres the more in my cistern
 Against a leonine summer—, putting first things first:
 Thousands have lived without love, not one without water. (584 l.25-30)

The source becomes syntactically intermingled in the twists of “not say,” “I said,” “had said,” suggesting that the product is both human and environmental in origin. The product, “—So many cubic metres the more in my cistern,” is both the measure of accumulated rain and the manifold lines of the metered poem. Yet, nature’s yield is deemed the more significant of the two as the poet concedes, “Thousands have lived

without love, not one without water.” The storm has given the human speaker sensations of love that endure through interactions of place and memory,¹⁴ as well as actual water, but the body’s needs must be met before such art is possible. Further, the water sustains not only humans, but “thousands” of non-human beings that co-exist, leading divergent and overlapping lives.

However, the poem’s title “First Things First,” with its exact word repetition at the beginning and end of the phrase, reminds the reader that final products are often inseparable from the inspirations that generate them. Environmentalists would do well to remember that the planetary goals they wish to reach rely on humans to change their current behaviors. Humans are creatures often motivated by their emotional reactions. People’s emotions about the environment are going to be factors in any large-scale human action. Thus fostering love (as Auden might put it), or emotional connection with nature and the non-human, is just as vital to the success of the environmental movement as the objective measurements of scientific data. Unless moved to act, people will not respond to that data. Consequently, literature also serves a necessary function for global change. Literature allows us to re-imagine our relationship with the environment by critiquing anthropocentrism, representing nature as autonomous and humans as dependent, as well as depicting other creatures as having their own consciousness and value. Cultivating greater empathy with and appreciation for the unique variety of non-human motivates conservation for biological diversity, changes in oil-dependency, and ethical treatment of non-human animals. The kinds of re-evaluations that literature can provoke are fundamental to persuading readers to feel themselves as embedded within a thriving

net of interacting, pulsating, worldly flesh. Ultimately, the measure of our written words may be the first impetus for putting the natural world first.

Notes

1. This particular line from Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is frequently quoted out of context. Standing alone, it seems to claim there is no social role for poetry, but this reading does not do justice to the poem's conclusion, nor the subtler textures of these words when put back in their proper context. Michael Thurston draws attention to this common misappropriation in his book titled *Making Something Happen*: "Auden holds out a vital role for poetry: the transformation of lived experience into fruitful freedom through the cultivation of imagination. [. . .] So while 'poetry makes nothing happen' in that it cannot directly effect change in history, it makes quite a lot happen in the indirect and mediated ways Auden leaves open for it" (6). Similarly, David Yezzi has attempted to resuscitate the complexity behind the aphorism: "It is true that Auden wrote 'poetry makes nothing happen.' He understood that no poem had saved a single Jew from death at the hands of the Nazis. Still he believed in the necessity of action. 'Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do,' he tells us, 'but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a moral choice'" (Yezzi 13).
2. William Cronon was one of the first to insist that our understanding of nature is always bound up with layers of cultural assumptions: "Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history" (*Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: Norton, 1996)
3. The first essay using this title is "Squares and Oblongs" *Poets at Work*. New York: Harcourt, 1948. 163-181. Poetry distinguishes a more accurate theory of poetry's purpose as "Poetry as a game of knowledge, a bringing to consciousness, by naming them, of emotions and their hidden relationships" (173). The second essay, "Squares and Oblongs" appeared in *Language: An Enquiry into Its Meaning and Function*, Ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen. New York: Harper, 1957. 174-78. In one passage, Auden aligns poetic form with organic process: "As a natural object, the verbal system of a poem belongs to the organic rather than the inorganic order, i.e., instead of the mathematically exact symmetry of the inorganic, it is rhythmical, its symmetries are perceptible but unmeasurable" (176).

4. There is a dearth of critical essays on Auden's later volumes of poetry, and some of the interpretive work that has been done seems to give short shrift to the poems' complexity. For example, John Fuller's explication of "Bestiaries are Out" assumes the speaker voices the poem's meaning: "It is only human beings who self-consciously create a habitat for their immortal souls. [. . .] Today we see how different [bees] really are, how indeed the only political model they provide is mechanical and totalitarian" (501). Closer scrutiny of the poem's formal aspects completely undermines this interpretation.

5. In his 1973 poem "No, Plato, No" Auden also questions the persistence of a mind-body dualism: "I can't imagine anything / that I would less like to be / than a disincarnate Spirit, / unable to chew or sip / or make contact with surfaces" (888 l.1-5).

6. The belief that science, like art, can also be subjective is a shift from an essay Auden wrote in 1948 depicting science as a source of an objective standard of "truth" that renders art a more limited faculty: "Modern science has destroyed our faith in the naïve observation of our senses: we cannot, it tells us, ever know what the physical universe is really like; we can only hold whatever subjective notion is appropriate to the particular human purpose we have in view" ("The Poet and The City" 78). In contrast, by 1967, at the conclusion of his "Secondary Worlds" lectures, he proclaims: "There might even be a return, in a more sophisticated form, to a belief in the phenomenal world as a realm of sacred analogies" ("Words and the Word" 144). Accordingly, the later poems reevaluate scientific claims to truth with more skepticism. Poems such as "Smelt and Tasted" (1969) and "Heard and Seen" celebrate the body's sensory knowledge with language that invokes a more personal science, the "chemical accord" that allows for the synaesthesia of apprehension, and a reverent gratefulness for the collage of understanding created through subjective variety in language that evokes biblical comparisons such as, "What-has-been and what-is-to-be / To vision form a unity."

7. Earlier in the poem, Auden recognizes the body as the origination of thought and creativity: "but for whose neural instructions I could never / acknowledge what is or imagine what is not" (870 l.14-15).

8. Although it has been suggested to me at a conference that Auden was categorically opposed to science, the fact of his ongoing subscription to *Scientific American* and even this poem, "A New Year Greeting," argues that Auden's relationship to science was more complex than a blatant dismissal of it. He maintained an avid interest in science despite his critical approach to some aspects of it. Another critic has pointed out that "Late in his life, [Auden] declared that the only two magazines to which he regularly subscribed were *Nature* and *Scientific American*" (Sharpe 115).

9. Richard Bloom wholly affirms the speaker's suppositions: "The deficiencies here are deftly stated, with a comic overtone growing out of the sheer and simple accuracy of the observation" (Bloom 218); or, even more problematic, equates the poet with the speaker: "["Homage to Clío"] begins in a garden, like "Their Lonely Betters," with

Auden reading a book and making some of the customary distinctions between animal and human life” (Bloom 222). Edward Mendelson’s critique is more nuanced, but still presupposes a separation between humans and other living beings: “The natural world, because it lacks personal voice, takes no responsibility for past or future” (Mendelson 363).

10. See *Animal Bodies, Human Minds: Ape, Dolphin and Parrot Language Skills* by William A. Hillix and Duane M. Rumbaugh, published in 2004 by Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publisher in New York.

11. “The poems present themselves as independent, loosely related units that do not specifically comment on each other and that exhibit no overt temporal or narrative form. Even when the underlying structure begins to emerge, we retain the primary sense of seven apparently independent poems arranged in space rather than in time” (Johnson 145); “The poems, which seem merely to balance the relative merits of various kinds of landscape, actually form a true sequence, in which the search for the Good Place gradually reveals its dangerous side, and the poet finally settles for an Eden which is not a place at all” (North 99).

12. The infusion of comedy in Auden’s later poetry has been widely noted; Mendelson, for example, titled his last chapter in *Later Auden*, “The Concluding Carnival.” While some might associate Auden’s bodily humor with triviality, Joseph Meeker suggests that comedy is a way to participate in the kind of “endless spontaneity” that keeps ecosystems thriving: “Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment, and upon our ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting us” (Meeker 21). This critical approach also illuminates some of the ironic humor that shades Auden’s poetry mocking humanity’s over-reaching egoism—the ability to laugh at human inadequacy can help promote healthy change.

13. “First Things First” loosely echoes Auden’s earlier and more famous poem about two human lovers in bed, one asleep, and one awake with his lover’s head laying “on my faithless arm” (“Lullabye” 1937, 157 l.2), wishing that coming “Noons of dryness find you fed / By the involuntary powers, / Nights of insult let you pass / Watched by every human love” (157 l.37-40). In “First Things First” the storm is the companion and “involuntary power” that watches over the lover now alone, reminding him of past human love as well as the continuing gifts of sustenance offered by the non-human presences.

CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is 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 the work of art.

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*

To understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to hear what it says (l'entendre). The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality' spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear. And conversely the whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth but a variant of the speech before our eyes, and to speak of its 'style' is in our view to form a metaphor. [. . .] Language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of things, the waves, and the forests.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Virginia Woolf's claim is emblematic of what E.M. Forster and W.H. Auden were also trying to include within their work. They were not engaged in a romantic quest for spiritual transcendence; rather they sought to "point at" (Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel" 28) a human consciousness embedded in a larger whole. Modernist writers like Forster, Woolf, and Auden were separating from a tradition that neatly covered the dynamic, shifting experience of bodily sensations with a smooth, linear layer of language like "butter on the bread." The significance of life that had been heretofore

missing was the sonority of being that arose from the Logos already inherent in the flesh of the world—the body’s style of thought understood as another tonal variety of the patterns already available in other non-human creatures, the moods of weather, and the landscape itself. Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenology explains it in terms of a struggle to hear “the totality of what is said” in our ordinary encounters with the world. Modernism includes experiments with new forms intended to capture an embodied perception of these other modes of meaning—“the whole landscape” as “a variant of speech before our eyes.” Individual human beings might be conceived as only a “part of” the “whole world [as] a work of art.” In short, Forster, Woolf and Auden were “making it new” by accounting for the flesh of the world in literary representations of the self in nature.

As Forster moved from classical pastoral to the evocation of land and sky’s potent agency surrounding the characters of *A Passage to India*, so Woolf opened a space for the non-human forces of life with formal innovations in “Kew Gardens,” and Lily Briscoe’s synthesizing artistic process. Auden’s addresses to the symbiotic community of his own aging body take such awareness into the intimate microcosm of the physical self. And in a final reflexive exchange, “Natural Linguistics” and “First Things First” imagine the environment’s ability to address humans in a language of its own.

Recognizing this facet of modernism within the formal innovations of these three authors springs the latch to other questions: Were other writers participating in embodied modernism? How does *urban* space reflect the press of the world’s flesh on the subjectivity of characters? Novels like *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Tarr* might be instructive. T.S. Eliot’s “Prufrock” may also be open to this kind of analysis. Does the

narrative of the United States' manifest destiny and conquest of wilderness yield a distinctly American representation of embodied modernism? How do the formal innovations of Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Wallace Stevens, or Elizabeth Bishop encode the flesh of the world? Does an embodied awareness of the world invite us to re-evaluate the use of silence in modernist literature? Perhaps what has been assumed to be absence may, upon close ecophenomenological reading, be *presence*? And, as I suggested in the introduction, embodied modernism might also offer new directions for postcolonial theory and other fields where prejudice between humans is considered. Indeed, a theoretical approach to literature based on Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology could productively complicate human relationships to the environment as they are depicted in other world literatures and other literary time periods as well.

Modernism, however, seems to have a unique relevance to our own contemporary crisis. Western culture is poised to reorient itself to the non-human world. Apocalyptic fears of expanding oceans, rising temperatures that won't sustain agricultural crops, emerging viruses, and dwindling biodiversity have scientists scrambling for solutions. Modernist literature offers us insight into how cataclysmic anxiety can be met with creativity. Our generation seems to be searching for ways of comprehending the new prerogatives implicit in a global community. Policies that govern economics, cultural values, air quality, water quality, and mining are all being called into question by a burgeoning awareness that the decisions of different countries produce effects that penetrate geographical boundaries. The flesh of the world is becoming readily apparent as a fact, but it has not yet been fully comprehended as an idea. Modernist literature

might prompt us to reimagine ourselves as individuals embedded in the shifting flesh of a sometimes frightening, but hopefully resilient, world.

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